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MAREEA-MARIA

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By SOPHIE KERR

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MAREEA—MARIA

Chapter One

"I SLAP her face. She steal Berta's counters, I see her. She make like she tie her shoes up—pooh, she barefoot —she slip her hand in, soft, slow, grab a counter—mebbe two——"

"Iss a lie—iss a lie—a big dam' lie! I cut your heart out, you liar!"

Mareea smiled tauntingly. "You cut my heart out—you! You touch me, you come near me just once—a-a-ah!" She screamed it, that long-drawn "a-ah," and it became shuddering anger death threat! Her hands, reeking with tomato juice, clenched and unclenched powerfully, as if over a throat. Her young face turned to a mask of vengeance. And the crowd stood back, all except old Berta and the manager, Jodie Bowers.

"Now, lookahere, girls," said Jodie, shifting his quid from the right to the left cheek. "You got to stop this snarlin' and spittin' and fightin', and git down to work. You Irma, if I ketch you stealin' any more counters I'm a-goin' to put you on the next boat back to Balt'mer—see? And I'll have a policeman waitin' for you when you git there—see?"

Irma began to cringe and whine: "I never stole a counter in my life from nobody, an' I bin packin' tomatoes five year, Mist Bowers. I just went to

pick up sumpn off the floor an' Mareea jumps at me——"

"I miss my counters ever since you come round to sit by me," piped up Berta. "I sew a good pocket in my skirt an' put my counters in there, but you so sly an' slippery, like an eel you are, you Irma." Berta was old and wrinkled and her voice was full of shrill quaverings, but she was valiant.

"Thass it, thass it," cried Mareea, her anger changing to loud mirth, "'Irma the Eel,' thass what we call you now. I guess no more slippin's an' slidin's for you, you Eel."

"You shut up, Mareea. You're always buttin' in," declaimed Jodie. "My Lord in heaven! Tomatoes stacked up six foot high this mornin' and you women have to start a fight! Go on back to work or I dock everybody two buckets—get that? Everybody! G'wan now, I mean it."

He waved long lean arms at the crowd of workers, and it melted away slowly toward bench and knife and bucket. All save Mareea.

"You dock Irma the Eel, you Jodie Bowers," she said, "but don't you dock me nor Berta. No, sir, I dare you to. I raise such a fight as you never seen. This ain't nothin', this mornin', to the fight I raise if you dock me two buckets."

Jodie Bowers grinned at her. He had handled gangs of foreigners in the Eden canning house for ten years and knew his business. Besides, he liked Mareea. "You're a spunky little rat," he said. "You'd look fine

pickin' on me, wouldn't you? I'd not stand a chance, once you got started. G'wan an' get to work, Mareea—I'll put Irma 'way round at the other side where you can't hardly see her. Go 'long now, that's a good girl. I got s'much to do this mornin' I don't know if I'm on my head or my heels. You'd ought t' feel sorry for me, stid of makin' a rookus."

Mareea could never withstand a smile. She turned toward her place in the great horseshoe of moving buckets and looked for her peeling knife, dropped in the mêlée. "Aw ri', Jodie, I help you. You be good boy, I be a good girl, see?"

The canning house, long, unpainted, gray, crouched between the placid river and the straight white road, a foul monster, staining the summer air with stench of tomato refuse, breaking the supreme quiet of the scene with the harsh beatbeat of its engine. Beyond the power house was the open shed where the foreign help lived during their brief stay. At the other end were the scales where the loads of tomatoes were weighed, and the wide door and staging where they were unloaded. This morning a half-dozen wagons were there, with flaming fruit piled in double racks, wagons drawn by trim-stepping mules with sleek sides and waggling, comic ears. The driver of the first wagon was a young man, tall, impatient, his quick blue eyes glinting with the annoyance of the enforced wait. He leaped from the wagon seat to the platform and came stamping in just as the row over Irma's theft subsided.

"For Pete's sake, why don't you send somebody out

to the scales, Jodie?" he demanded. "I've not got all day to lay round in, like you have."

"Hold your hosses, Wes'," said Jodie. "I'll be there soon's I'm sure there ain't goin' to be murder done 'mongst the girls. I'm short-handed this mornin'—Jim Stallen's on a spree, and I can't trust none of the coloured boys to handle figgers. I've sent uptown for Chris Butler, but he ain't had time to git here yet." The two men walked back to the scales as Jodie talked.

"Girls on a rampage?" asked Wes'.

"As per usual. There's a big Slovak name' Irma sneaks a counter outa somebody's pocket every once in so often, an' there's a little Italian, name' Mareea, cute as Christmas, caught 'er at it this mornin', an right away there was a high ol' fracas. Drive on the scales, Wes', I'm ready."

Wesley leaped to his wagon and started his team. The figures taken, he drove on alongside the platform where four stalwart negroes waited to unload. He must wait until this was done, when he would drive back on the scales to have his empty wagon and baskets weighed, this amount to be deducted from the first figures, leaving the net weight of the tomatoes alone to his credit.

While he waited he thought about the fight and wished he had come in time to see it. There was always restlessness in the community when the foreigners were there, and the presence of so many strange women piqued the curiosity of the young men round about, sometimes prompted them to emotional investigation.

Not that they got much satisfaction. The sentiment of Eden was too set against that sort of thing. But there were always a few roisterers and roughs, the gang that helled around in the Griffin shanty boat, and their familiars, who hung after these aliens, and from these meetings, these affairs, colourful queer whispers sifted up through the better element. Even a solid young farmer like Wesley Dean could find a vicarious tingle in his proximity to these odd creatures who, according to reports, were animal in body, child in sense, quick and fierce and free.

He wandered in through the canning house and stared at the women at work. The buckets of scalded unpeeled tomatoes moved slowly along on the slatted carrier until a woman snatched it out and set a bucket of peeled fruit in its place. At the bottom of each of those unpeeled buckets there was a counter, a small metal disk, which was the worker's when she had emptied it, a claim for cash against the canning house. The morning was still and hot, and here with the scalding vats, the steaming fruit, and, farther on, the hot-water cookers for filled cans, it was stifling, nauseating. The women wore at best two garments, most of them but one. They sat hunched over their buckets, and their hands moved with the swiftness and sureness and steadiness of machinery. Wesley Dean stared fascinated at one old witch who rocked from side to side as she peeled, like an automatic toy. He took off his hat and mopped his face. Gosh, this place was a sweat box!

He wondered which of them had been fighting. It

must be funny to see women fight, funny and bad, too. He didn't believe he'd really like to see it, only, of course, these women weren't like the girls he knew. Nobody could think of any of the Eden girls fighting. They might say something spiteful once in a while, but they didn't often do that. These girls, here in the cannery, were more like the coloured women who lived on the back streets, and he felt amused and superior at the thought. These weren't nice American girls—like Belle Lucas, for instance, or Manie Nichols. Belle and Manie were his sort of girls, neat and pretty, good cooks, well brought up. These women were so dirty, and most of them were old or loosely fat. He didn't see why the fellows talked about them so.

He had been walking near the steaming horseshoe and staring more than he knew. Most of the women had not noticed him, but here and there came glances of interest, a half smile. Wesley, tanned and straight and tall, was pleasant to look at in place of Jodie Bowers's slouch and sharp, stubbled beak. He paused, complacent, confident, and asked a jocose question of the nearest worker.

"Who was it started the fight I been hearin' about?"

Led by the impulse which makes us all invariably choose whatever topic is taboo for that particular conversation, he had tossed his question to Mareea. She turned on him in such a blaze that he fell back a step and flung up a warding hand.

"You mind you own business, you nosey! Who you,

anyway, ask question like Godlemighty? Ev'ybody here good as you are, maybe better. We work an' you loaf."

"For Pete's sake," said Wesley, aghast at the sudden tempest, "I didn't mean any harm. I didn't——" he stopped to look at her, for she had jumped to her feet and was facing him—"why, I didn't really mean any harm, or to be fresh." His dismay was genuine, his apology sincere.

"Oh, well," said Mareea easily, "maybe I was too fresh myself. I tell you, mister, I am the girl started the fight, an' I been sittin' here thinkin' about it, an' kind of sore at ev'ybody. So when you ask I get mad again an' holler at you. I'm all of a jerk to-day."

"That's all right," said Wesley, "that's all right. I didn't mean any offense, like I said. I——" Speech died on his tongue. He had never before looked into black eyes, deep and round as wells, soft as velvet, eyes that laughed and mocked and were serious all at once. Mareea's lips were very red, her cheeks soft rose through dusk, her hair as black as her eyes and laid close and shining around her head. He backed another step, a tribute of respect to such vivid beauty.

Mareea sat down again. For her the incident was closed. "Aw ri'," she said, reaching for a filled bucket. "Aw ri', mister. Goo'bye."

One of the negro unloaders stuck his head in at the door. "Aw, Mist' Wes'," he called, "Mist' Bowahs waitin' foh you!"

It gave him an exit. But he was not content to go.

He wanted to stay, wanted it with urgency that amazed and shamed him. He kept looking back at Mareea, the more easily because she did not look up at him. This girl, this lovely ripe creature—he had seen her curving soft body under her filthy shift of blue cotton, he had seen the way her throat slipped down into the swell of her bosom, her skin damp with sweat and soft with youth, flushed and warm. He'd never looked at a girl so, never seen one who revealed herself so much. Belle Lucas was a pretty girl, yes, and so was Manie Nichols, but they were just that, no more. This girl, this ragged little alien, was girls and flowers and fruit and sunshine and honey on his lips. On his lips—why, his lips were dry and he himself was light-headed.

"You look like you was comin' down with a tech of malaria, Wes'," drawled Jodie Bowers. "Better stop by the drug sto' an' git some quinine."

Wesley Dean took the tally of his load's weight and drove away without reply. He was still seeing Mareea angry, Mareea mollified, Mareea spitting her defiance at him, Mareea smiling as she admitted that she had been too fresh, maybe. Funny, to get so stirred up over a girl, one of the canning-house lot. He was a fool, a plain dumb fool. He'd ought to be above that kind of stuff. He wasn't one of your crazy roustabouts to mess up with any woman who came along. Not that he was overly straitlaced or pious, but he had too much sense. This girl, now, girls of her kind made a lot of trouble. Yes, but what was her kind? Maybe he was too hard on her. He had no right to think she was the bad sort be-

cause she had to work in that dirty herd back there and didn't wear enough clothes and used rough language. She hadn't acted gay and come-on with him, certainly—almost might have thought she didn't notice him except to jump on him when he asked who started the fight. He wavered through a sea of chopping, changing opinion, with Mareea gradually becoming blameless.

He hadn't any business to go in and gawp around and ask fool questions. It was none of his place and none of his business, and she was perfectly right to flare up. Those women weren't cattle, they were human beings, and they had their rights, same as everybody else. This is a free country, and people ought to treat each other decent and—and—kind. He really ought to make a chance, when he went back with the next load, to tell the girl he didn't mean a thing by what he'd said—overlooking the fact that he had already told her so. Maybe he might take her a little present, say a basket of peaches or a melon. That would show what sort of fellow he was, willing to own he was in the wrong and make amends. Yes, that's what he'd do—he'd take her a melon out of the well, wrap it up in a wet sack so's to keep it cool. Or maybe she'd like a basket of peaches better. There were some nice ripe Mary's Choice on the tree by the cow barn. He thought of the colour of the peaches and their soft bloom and saw again the colour of Mareea's cheeks. Yes, peaches would be the thing to take. There would be a fitness in the gift that the melon, however delicious, somehow lacked. Wesley Dean knew nothing of poetry and less of romance, but he knew his

orchards by heart. Then, too, if he got a melon out of the well his mother or sister would be sure to see him and ask him why.

He had not troubled to drive his team on the way home because they knew it perfectly. They were young, quick beasts and made the three miles in good time, turning in at the Dean gate without guidance and with that smart competence of well-fed, well-trained mules which verges on conceit. There wasn't a better pair in the county. They were part of Wesley Dean's pride. He liked his fields and his beasts to be superior.

The house was an old one, of brick, unusual among the frame structures of the neighbourhood, and it had been built by Joshua Dean, Wesley's great-grandfather, who was a lavish man—so lavish that what with building a strong house, and keeping a pack of foxhounds, and breeding blooded colts, and giving big parties, and making barrels of cider and partaking of it liberally, he could find scant time for the humdrum business of farming. It had taken two generations after him to climb out of the abyss of mortgages into which he had blithely dropped them. Wesley's father had done the most and the hardest climbing, and now the place was free and clear and flourishing. But he had worked himself to death and had no pleasure from the fruits of his labour. "By gorry, Grandpap had the rights of it," he said, grimly wistful on his deathbed. "Have a good time and let them that come after you pay for it. That's the ticket."

"You don't mean that, William," his wife replied.

"You'd never been content to live thataway. You've got a conscience."

"Yes, I've got a conscience an' it's broke my back," replied William Dean. "Don't you let Wes' go my gait, Allie. I don't want to think about my son an old man at forty, like me. I'd not die easy with that prospect."

"Will, I wish I'd realized," said Allie Dean, weeping. "I didn't want you to go so hard, you know it. I'd ought to've held you back more."

"You! Allie, my girl, you've worked harder'n I have. But you're made of better stuff. Granpap and Dad both left me puny. But I've striven my best, and the land's sweet and thrifty again, and the mortgage's paid and everything's in line for the future. If you give young Wes' and Lucy a stepfather, Allie, choose a good farmer. That's all I crave."

"Wes' and Lucy aren't going to have any stepfather, not if he was the best farmer in the state and the best man, after you. I'm your wife and I'm going to meet you in heaven as your wife. Nobody's going to take your place with me."

Allie Dean had kept her voluntary promise. There were plenty of men who would have been glad to step into William Dean's shoes, but she would not listen to them, content with her widowhood and her two children. Always a grave woman, religiously inclined, she turned to the church more devoutly than before and became one of its staunchest supports. As Wesley was seventeen when his father died, she had promptly

treated him as a grown man and the head of the family, putting on him responsibilities beyond his years, but not, she knew, beyond his strength. Lucy was only twelve, her father's own child in looks and in a certain frailty of physique, so she was petted and cossetted. All this was ten years ago. Wesley was now twenty-seven, Lucy twenty-two. And Allie Dean was fifty-three, straight, handsome, and a powerful and jealous queen regent in the Dean domain, for all her apparent deference to her son as heir and ruler.

As Wes' drove up the lane she appeared at the kitchen door—a door that opened on the wide porch and commanded a view of all comers. In her gray gingham dress and a checked apron, her hair parted and straightly smooth, her white collar a line of freshness against her throat, there could have been no greater contrast with the girl who was filling his mind. Allie Dean was one of those women who can clean house or do a day's preserving without being reduced to weary disorder, and her son and daughter sometimes teased her about being so particular in her dress when she was so firm in the belief that vanity was a deadly sin. "It's not vain to not be a sloven," she assured them serenely.

She did not speak or stop Wesley, merely saw that it was he and then went back to the kitchen. That was Allie Dean's way, too. A sensible woman, though it was whispered here and there that she was too sure of her own saintliness and too sharp and severe in her judgments, unrelenting in her disapproval, once provoked. But they were the lighter souls who said it.

"Bud'll have time to take three loads down this morning if he's not held up by the weighing," she said to Lucy as she resumed her work. She was making a cake, whisking the whites of the eggs with smooth, even strokes. All about her was clean and in order. The kitchen floor was scrubbed, and the table top. Scalloped paper borders decorated the shelves. Clean pans and bowls sat in place, ready to her hand. The stove shone silvery dark from many polishings.

Lucy was washing lamp chimneys at the sink, a daily duty which she loathed but did not shirk. Signs of her early delicacy were still upon her in her slenderness, the unusual whiteness of her complexion, the quick droop of fatigue that came too soon about her lips and eyes. But she was a pretty girl and a lively one, with a flourish of vivacity about her that her mother and brother lacked.

"Wonder if Bud asked Belle or Manie for the excursion," she said. "I sort of think Belle. I hope so, anyway. I don't like Manie Nichols, never have and never expect to."

"She's a very good girl, Manie is."

"Too painful good. Pulls a long lip and looks shocked if anybody makes a joke. I don't see how Bud stands her. She may act different with him, though, for she cert'ny is trying hard to get him."

She soused the last of the chimneys in hot water and caught it on her drying cloth. "Mom," she asked, "d'-you really wish Bud would get married?"

"If it's to the right girl."

"Oh, the right girl! Bud's so simple—it'll be the smartest one, the one who'll catch him."

"He's not so simple. He's stayed single till he's 'most thirty—and not for want of girls after him."

"I should say not. I think it's our fault. We make him too comfortable, and besides he knows——"

"He knows what?"

"He knows his wife'll have to live here with us and that we mightn't like it. Bud's awful good-hearted."

This was an old subject, but Allie Dean gave it a new twist. "You'll be getting a home of your own before long, I shouldn't wonder."

"Oh, now, Mother!"

"And I reckon between you and Bud I could find a place. Or I could go to town and rent a room for myself if Bob Tracy and I couldn't get along."

"Mom——" Lucy was flooded with colour from chin to forehead.

"Oh, well, if it's Eddie Judge or Ryner Gaines——"

Lucy picked up the tray of lamps and fled, laughing. "Mother, I'm ashamed of you. A fellow can't even come to take me out riding but you begin to bake the cake and get the wedding veil ready."

"No, indeedy—I'm going to bake you a lot richer cake than this when you get married, baby," Allie Dean called after her. She liked to tease Lucy, and she was glad that the girl had so many beaux. She didn't care in the least how soon she got a son-in-law, provided he was the right sort. But if Wesley married—ah, that was different. Allie Dean loathed and dreaded the thought

of Wesley taking a wife, loathed and dreaded it supremely. No one knew this, though she felt that Lucy suspected it, and she was sensitive to any sounding of her sentiments. That was why she had cunningly shifted the talk to Lucy's intentions and dropped the conjectures on Wesley's marriage prospects.

When Wesley went back to the canning house with his second load of tomatoes his mother's cake was baked and she was icing it with the rich chocolate he loved, but she did not fail to glance out after him. Luckily he was so far beyond her range of vision that she did not see the basket of peaches beside him.

Wesley drove along in an odd quandary as to how he could offer his gift. He dared not take it in and hand it to the girl with Jodie Bowers or Chris Butler anywhere near; they'd joke him without mercy. Bad enough to have to face the foreigners. All the same, he wanted to see her and he wondered what she would say this time. He was excited and eager.

Chris Butler was at the scales, and as soon as the first weighing was done Wes' drove up to the unloading platform, twisted the reins around the corner iron, took his fruit, and went inside with a deliberately casual manner, an air of merely looking about, of scarcely being there in person at all and having no least interest in anything or anyone present.

Jodie Bowers was at his desk in the doorless little office, but Jodie's face was turned away, so that was good. Mareea was where he had last seen her, peeling tomatoes with unbelievable quickness and intent on

that alone. Wesley walked quickly to her, dropped the basket of peaches behind her, and said, half under his breath: "Here's somethin' for you."

She turned like a startled cat, a lithe, sudden twist, seized the basket, and when she saw the fruit, laughed aloud. "Much oblige', mister," she called after the retreating Wesley. "Thass grand! Look, Berta," she said to her neighbour. "Look what he brought me. Ain't that swell, maybe? Say, we eat 'em for our dinner."

"I think you caught a fella," remarked the sage Berta.

"If he bring presents I hope I have," said Mareea, and set her teeth in the side of a peach with gusto.

Wesley watching from across the room saw the juice drip down her chin and should have been disgusted because she wiped it off with her sleeve, then, noting him, she laughed again and waved her hand with the bitten peach in a pantomime of pleasure. But he was not disgusted. He was vaguely aware that he had never seen a gesture more beguiling. If he could only speak to her again! But he had not the courage to dare the cynic comment of Jodie Bowers, who could hardly be expected to sit like a statue with his head in one direction. He waited, powerless to move either way.

Mareea, seeing his hesitation, rose and strolled toward him, still eating her peach.

"Say, why you bring me these?" she demanded. "They're awful good."

"Well, you know—I thought you—I mean I was afraid you'd think I hadn't been very polite when I was

in here this morning. And we've got such a lot of nice peaches—and so——"

"Oh, these are apologize peaches—and you got a lot of 'em, eh?"

In laughing with her he found ease of his awkwardness. "That's it—they're apologize peaches."

"You apologize some more, mister, any time you want. My Godlemighty, it's grand to eat somethin' don't taste and smell tomato. This place ain't nothin' but tomato hell."

"I don't see how you stand it, working here all day. Listen"— a divine scheme leaped to impulsive expression—"listen—if I was to come down the river in a rowboat this evening 'long about dark, could you meet me?" (He must speak with haste, for Jodie Bowers might appear at any second.) "Go down to that little point where there's a beach—right down the river a little ways—do you know?" He pointed through the wide door, and his hand shook as he did it. "Say, will you?"

"Sure I go," said Mareea without hesitation. "'Long about eight o'clock, maybe. Yeah, I'll be there. An' much oblige' for the peaches, mister."

She threw the pit of the one she had been eating over his head and smiled at him with frank assurance. After she had settled herself again beside Berta she whispered delightedly to the old woman: "I sure caught a fella this time, an' he's good-lookin' an' he's nice. I'd ought to told him to bring some more peaches to-night. Thass me—never think what to do till it's too late."

That she had not told him to bring more peaches concerned her far more than the invitation given and accepted and the evident emotion of the strange young man. It didn't matter to her that she had not learned his name—"mister" would do as well as anything. He was new—and Mareea welcomed everything new. He would take her in a boat on the quiet, cool river, a better way to spend the evening than slapping mosquitoes in the shed where she and Berta and twenty other women ate and quarrelled and slept in a swarm—close, dirty, noisy, hot.

"After supper," she confided to Berta, "I wash some and put on my other dress. If I had a red reebbon for my hair!"

"I steal you reebbon from that Irma. Then we're even," answered Berta. "She got a good reebbon, red like tomatoes."

"Oh, Godlemighty," yawned Mareea, "wish the day was gone and done."

Chapter Two

THE full significance of what he had done at first escaped Wes' Dean. That he, respectable, well-to-do, a church member in good standing and a son of Allie Dean, had made a date to go on the river with a ragglety-taggle canning-house worker was a thing so far outside his imagination that it did not seem possible. He had built a trap, baited it, walked into it, and latched the door behind him. And though he was not exactly sorry, or struggling to get out, he was dazed to find himself there. It was the most daring, the most revolutionary act of his life.

"I must 'a' been crazy," he told himself again and again, "I must 'a' been outa my head." From this his mind involuntarily leaped to ways and means. Easy enough for him to saddle his horse and ride along the river to Sherwood Lucas's and borrow his rowboat—it was almost directly across from the place where he had told Mareea to meet him. Easy enough, since Sherwood was a morose and uninquisitive old bachelor who talked of nobody's doings, not even his own, to avoid any news of the escapade being sown abroad through the community. Easy enough, all of it, if there wasn't any slip anywhere; if some other crazy fellow didn't borrow

Sherwood's boat first, or somebody else's boat, and go rowing around in the vicinity of Wesley's tryst. The thought of being seen, of being talked about, of being laughed at, put him in a cold sweat.

Sherwood Lucas was a distant connection of Belle. There was that to think of. On the other hand, Sherwood had detached himself from his kith and kin with the final bitter emphasis that comes with severance of ties of blood. He'd most likely be pleased to know that one of Belle's more-or-less suitors was dangling after another girl. Belle's robust pink blondeness, her easy smiles, her too-evident delight in his attentions, and her desire to read matrimony into them at the earliest possible date, all appeared to Wes' Dean at this moment as stale and flat and stupid. Mareea's dark fire snuffed out the paler flame.

And there was Manie Nichols—for her also Wesley now experienced a fierce dislike. She was less open than Belle but more insinuating. She had never appealed to him save in his more serious moods and—though he did not know it—when his mother had deliberately manœuvred him toward her. Manie's religious unction was pleasing to Allie Dean. She felt that Wesley's soul would be supremely safe with Manie for his wife, and also, more practically, that Manie would never attract other men. Manie was a good, good girl. Of Belle she was not so sure. She distrusted Belle's yellow hair and laughter as yellow hair and laughter are always bound to be distrusted by all women who haven't them.

There was no reason to think about Manie Nichols.

Wes' reflected, with a flash of humour, that if she ever discovered he'd taken a canning-house girl out rowing Manie would pray for him publicly. "A poor lost sheep strayed from the fold" was what he would be to Manie unless he repented and recanted and ate humble pie to the point of spiritual dyspepsia.

His mother, too. At the thought of his mother Wesley became sincerely troubled. He had never fought, never denied the bonds in which she held him, though he was aware of them. He loved her dearly and was swayed by her willingly. If he ever felt rebellious against her strictness, against her managing insistence, he crushed back the feeling with "Mother's a darn sight smarter than I am. I'd be a jack to set myself against her"—and softened the moment with "She's had a heap of trouble, and I've always vowed I'd never cause her none." But nothing he could do, no, not even if he went to Frank Shane's oyster-bar saloon and got roaring drunk on rot-gut whisky, would hurt and distress his mother so much as mixing himself up with a girl like Mareea. He knew it as well as he knew that the day was hot, the shell road white as milk, his team strong and sound, his tomato crop abundant. He knew the fixed and tyrannical quality of his mother's love for him, her jealous ambitions for him. He had carried over into manhood much of the awe he had felt as a child for her austerity. The coloured field hands always said, "Ev'ybody walk light roun' Mis' Allie," divining that strength and acrimony for conflict lay beneath her quiet voice and manner. Wes' had always walked light.

But in spite of his shrinking from the pillory of ridicule, in spite of Belle and Manie, in spite of his mother's affection and his unwillingness to clash with her, he was amazed to discover that he had not the least intention of failing to meet Mareea. His conscience might rave, his caution might warn, but his intention held tight.

Lucy was ringing the big outside bell for twelve o'clock, freedom to the men in the fields and a summons to him for dinner as he put the mules in the stable. He came into the house wondering if he looked the same as at breakfast. Such drama had engrossed him since then he feared that he must show signs of it.

The farmhouse dining room was cool and peaceful, out of the sun. It was screened and had soothing green blinds. All the colour of the room was low and there was restfulness in its order and simplicity. There was green-and-white matting on the floor, and the chairs were hand-made black oak that had first belonged to old Joshua Dean, the cheerful profligate. The walls were whitewashed and the wide open fireplace was filled with green boughs through which the brass andiron tops shone palely like balls of gold silk. There were no furnishings beyond the table and chairs, Allie Dean's sewing stand, a side table of cherry wood, and a desk with open pigeonholes above it where farm accounts were kept. There was a gold-framed mirror above the mantel, and on it sat two prim, flat bouquet vases of flowered china and a pair of twisted brass candlesticks which Allie Dean had brought to the house as a bride.

The red-and-white tablecloth woven in squares was the one really bright thing in the room and perfectly clinched the values of the rest. The china was plain white ironstone, the knives and forks of steel with bone handles. In the cupboard Allie Dean had silver knives and forks, thin, fine china with gold bands, but these were for company.

Wesley Dean sat at the head of his table and his mother at the foot, with Lucy between them, ready to jump up and run to the kitchen for anything needed. It was a good meal, for Allie Dean was a notable cook. There was lima bean soup with slithery little square dumplings, slices of crisp ham in red gravy, baked sweet potatoes, fried tomatoes, onions and cucumbers sliced in vinegar, hot biscuit, and, for dessert, sliced peaches with thick cream to pour over them and the cake of the morning, five layers high, a mighty plateau of sweetness and light covered with thick chocolate lava.

"This is about the last of the Mary's Choice peaches," said Allie Dean. "Lucy picked these this morning, and she says there aren't many left. I reckon the men have been helping themselves."

Wesley Dean silently speculated on what would happen if he mentioned that he had taken a basketful to a canning-house girl about half an hour before Lucy went to the tree. It made him want to laugh. And that further surprised him. He must be getting to be an awful backslider if he could do such things and feel tickled.

"This cake's elegant, Mom," he said. He always praised his mother's chocolate cake; she expected it.

"Who you going to take on the excursion, Bud?" asked Lucy.

"I don't believe I'll go. I'm sick of excursions. Sand in your shoes, and hot and sticky, and kids hollering round, and cinders on the train."

"Oh, but, Bud! The Sunday-school excursion."

"I know it." He started to say something heretical about the Sunday school, but changed his mind. "Well, maybe I'll go. I'm not sure yet. But the farm work's so heavy and there's nobody I can really depend on. You and Mother can go, all right, only don't forget to leave me some dinner."

"You think a lot of your eating, Bud. I feel sorry for your wife."

"I feel sorry for your husband if he's got to eat your cooking." This was merely brotherly badinage, for Lucy was almost as good a cook as her mother.

"Belle makes grand chocolate cake—she'll be all upset if you don't go on the excursion."

"Belle never has any trouble finding a beau." Wesley felt a rascally impulse to tease. "Maybe if I don't go I could persuade her to stay home, too, and come out and cook me a meal in the middle of the day."

"I don't doubt you could. Mother, isn't he a case?"

"That's very foolish talk from both of you," said Allie Dean. "I hope you'll fix it somehow to go on the excursion, son. If Belle doesn't want you for a beau, I do."

"And Lucy does, too, of course."

"I certainly do not. I'd stay home myself if I couldn't get a beau that was nicer'n you, Mr. Buddy."

"There ain't anybody nicer'n me. Is there, Mom?"

"Sometimes," said Lucy, "sometimes I suspect Mom of being just a mite prejudiced in your favour, Bud. Ever notice it?"

"Can't say I have. You're the favoured one around here. I wisht I was a woman and had nothing to do but set in a rocking chair and wave a palm-leaf fan at myself. That'd be pretty soft."

"I wish he had to do the housework for just one day, don't you, Mother? The cooking and the cleaning and the washing dishes and the skimming and making butter —and most of all I wish he had to clean the lamps. He'd be glad enough to get back to riding on that wagon all day long. That's a hard job, that is."

"I wish you two'd stop this everlasting wrangling about nothing."

Lucy burst out laughing. "My goodness, Mom, you know we don't mean a thing. If we ever got really fussing it'd sound very different, wouldn't it, Bud?"

Wesley, his meal finished, rising from the table, stretching his arms above his head, and looking about for his pipe, agreed. "I'd just put you over my knee and spank you if I got really provoked."

"I'd like to see you try it." Lucy snatched at him as he went by, pummelled him gently, and pretended to box his ears. He dodged, laughing, and the scuffle ended by her chasing him around the dining room, but

he seized his pipe and ran out to the kitchen, then to the porch. "You leave me alone," he called back. "Hit somebody your own size."

"You children act like you weren't over six years old, I do declare," said Allie Dean, but she was smiling.

Lucy paused, breathless, and began to clear away the dishes. "Oh, Bud," she said, "if you decide to go on the excursion, don't take Manie, will you?"

"What's the matter with Manie?"

"That's what I'd like to know, Lucy," said Allie Dean rebukingly. "You seem to feel a mighty sudden disfavour to Manie."

Wesley put his head in at the door and grinned. "Bet she thought your new hat was too gay. Bet she said a real moral girl wouldn't wear a hat all over pink roses."

"She wears dumb hats herself," flashed Lucy. "If you marry her, Bud, you'll have to toe the mark. Family prayers, experience meeting, church twice on Sundays, Sunday school. Do you good, though."

"Lucy," scolded her mother, "what's got into you? You'd ought to be ashamed to talk thataway about as nice a girl as Manie Nichols. I like her, and if Bud wants to marry her he'll hear no objections from me."

This was the most open thing she had ever said to Wesley about marriage. She waited for his answer with strained eagerness.

"I'm not a-going to marry Manie Nichols, and that's flat, so you and Sis don't need to figure on it," came back the emphatic answer from Wesley, smoking on the porch.

"Then it's Belle."

"Then it's not Belle, neither. Lay off this marrying me, you two. I got trouble enough without a wife."

Complacence quirked the corners of Allie Dean's severe mouth. She was reassured. Wesley would certainly not have been so forthright about the two girls if he hadn't meant it. He was still her own.

Chapter Three

IT HAD been easy to get away, because he so often rode for a while in the evening without an objective, and his mother and sister were accustomed to his going. He did not make the mistake of putting on good clothes. He had washed and changed his shirt before supper, but that, too, was usual, and when he sauntered down to the stables for his horse, Lucy and Allie, rocking on the porch, noticed nothing.

The ease of it gave Wesley a new respect for his power to deceive. As he saddled Topsy he reflected that if his womenfolk had the slightest inkling of what he was up to they'd be after him with hysterical tears, entreaties, commands. They had suspected nothing, he was sure of it. Even the shrewd, penetrating glances his mother sometimes levelled on him when she wanted to get at his inner thoughts had been absent. He could not help swaggering a bit to himself, and he wanted to laugh foolishly, all alone. He was, he surely was, a devil of a fellow. Starting off to meet a canning-house girl as cool as you please and nobody so much as getting a hint of it.

Sherwood Lucas was sitting on his doorstep in his usual state of disorder as to clothes and gloomy overcast as to mind. He did not stir when Wesley rode up, but

his dog, a white setter bitch, intelligent and devoted, warned him of the newcomer by a single low bark.

Wesley dismounted, tied Topsy to a tree, patted her neck to reassure her about the dog, and then advanced.

"Evening, Sherwood."

"Evenin'," grunted Sherwood.

"I'd like to borrow your boat a spell if you're not aiming to use it."

"Go ahead. Pull 'er up on the bank when you're done with 'er."

"Yeah, I will. Much obliged. I won't be more'n an hour."

To this Sherwood answered nothing. It was wholly indifferent to him how long Wesley used his boat. The dog, however, followed Wesley down the bank and watched him suspiciously as he shoved off.

Until this moment Wes' had been calm and secure within himself. But as the boat floated out in the vague shadows of the river and he ruffled the surface of the tide with the thrust of the oars he was seized by an ague of emotion and uncertainty. He was torn in two—all of his usual self, all of his reason urged him to go back, pull the boat on the bank, and gallop Topsy home to safety and the known commonplace of daily life. But something new within, some force he had not felt before, an electric daring and desire for adventure, drew him on. As his oars broke the placid water, so this same desire broke all of his old life, irresistibly, and he could never go back to it and travel its smooth and narrow rut again. This was no mere quick uncontrolled

hankering after a woman. It was a loosening of his naïve and contented spirit from all that had kept it naïve and content.

Sherwood Lucas's house was slightly above and across from the point where he had directed Mareea to wait, but there was little current and his progress was steady. He could see the lights, faint and flickering, of the sheds of the canning-house workers, and now and then he smelled the stench of rotted tomato that made a foul pall over the vicinity.

As he neared the other shore he rowed very slowly. The strip of beach shone in the dusk, a sandy white belt between the gray of the water and the black green of crowding scrubby alder and pine and sycamore above. He peered in anxiously, frowning in the effort to see, and then a figure moved softly, the sand whispered under a light step.

"Hello," said Mareea, "that you, mister?"

He had an odd, sudden wish for the decencies of convention. "My name's Wesley Dean," he said almost stiffly, as he drew the boat in and steadied it.

Mareea giggled. "We-aslee Din," she repeated. "Thass a funny name." She stepped over the thwarts, clutched at the air. "O-oh—it's tippin' me over."

"You sit right down there, in the stern," said Wesley, helping her with one hand. "Pull up your skirt and put your feet on that piece o' plank. Sherwood Lucas never thinks o' cleaning this boat."

He was calmer now that he could tell her what to do, as if she were Lucy. He pushed the boat out from the

beach, sat down facing her, and rowed fast. "We'll get outa that smell as soon's we can," he explained. He also meant to get away from any lurking eavesdroppers or edified beholders.

"You bring me some more peaches, Mist' Din?"

"No, I didn't. I'll bring you some to the cannery tomorrow."

"Say, you don' know my name no more'n I knew yours. I'm name' Mareea Gianelli. You c'n call me Mareea. Ev'ybody does."

She was perfectly at ease, while his awkwardness had returned and he could not look directly at her, only throw swift glances in her direction. Yet he knew that the outline of her head was small and trim, with the bow of stolen ribbon poised jauntily. Her face was no more than a blur with two smudges for eyes, and her light dull dress melted into the shadows and the mist from the water. Only her voice, low and plangent, held in its living quality all of her youth, all of her soft young body, her warm hands, her round throat, her colour, her carelessness, her high vitality. Her voice made a picture of her for him in spite of her actual indistinctness. It came to him as a physical contact. He could feel it on his lips, against his lowered eyes. He could have kissed her voice.

"How'd you come to be with these canning-house people?" he asked at last. "You don't like that class of work, do you?" He hoped she would say that she hated it. He wanted her to hate it as he hated it for her.

"All the year I' been workin' in a fact'ry. Little tin

boxes they make there, pretty pictures on 'em, roses, birdies, ladies, little boxes for powder and candy, little boxes for ev'ything—they print these pictures on those little boxes an' then they put those little boxes in big ovens an' dry the pictures fast, tight. Very nice in winter, Mist' Din, very warm and comfortable, but when summer comes along—whew, hotter than hell, that fact'ry! And stink of inks an' tin! My Godlemighty, how she stink! So then Berta say le's go down in the country, peel tomatoes, live outdoors, an' I say le's do it, too. But tomatoes stink worse as the inks an' it's pret' near so hot. All the same, I like it on the big boat comin', I like it lookin' out the window when I work at the water, the green trees, I like nice Mist' Din who bring me peaches." She chuckled in her throat, a velvety, cajoling noise.

"But, look, haven't you got any family, any mother or father? Don't they take any care of you? A girl like you oughtn't to be runnin' round with such a gang."

"They ain't a gang. Each one to herself, thass the way we come. Only some of us is friends. Berta now. I live with Berta, but she ain't Italian like me. She come here from Prague—thass further as Italy—but she took me when my father, mother, sister, brother, all die quick an' bad with fever. Berta's a good ol' woman—not much sense sometimes, but awful kind an' good. Why, look, she stole this reebbon for me to wear tonight off Irma, an' Irma's twicet as big as Berta, an' if she finds it out there'll be a terrible fight."

Wesley Dean felt his respectable hair rising on his

respectable scalp at this recital. "Your own folks all dead, then?" he managed to say faintly.

"Yeah, all dead. Dead when I'm a little small child. My father come from Brescia—you know Brescia?"

"No, I don't."

"Me neither. I wasn' no more'n two years old when we come away from there. An' my father an' my mother an' my sister an' my brother all older'n me, we all come to Balt'mer on the ship. My father he want to buy him some land like he had at home, but ev'ywhere they cheat him, they rob him, till he ain't got no more money. So he can't buy no land. He cry, my father. Thass first thing I remember in all my life, how my father cry an' my mother cry an' we all cry. My mother's crying drop down on my face. Then my father hafta work on the railroad."

"My goodness! My *goodness !* How old were you when your father died?"

"Six, maybe seven. They all die quick with the fever, very bad. Berta she took me an' hid me, for she know my mother don't want me stuck in no or-phan as-y-lum"—she said the words slowly and carefully—"an' I live along with Berta ever since. Oh, she's good, Berta."

Wesley Dean considered this tale of tragedy and benevolence from an uncomprehending distance in experience and environment. The part of him that was his mother prompted him to reply: "Might 've been better for you if you'd gone to the orphan asylum. You might 've had a better bringing up, and some nice family might 've took you."

"Well, you've got one grand nerve," said Mareea fierily. "You nothing but a country jake an' you tellin' me how I should be brought up. You can take me right back to shore, Mr. Smarty Din, an' don't bring me no peaches to-morra nor no other day. Maybe you think because I work in tomatoes I'm nothin', eh? I'm just as good as you are, an' I mind my own business."

"Well, for the goodness' sake," said Wesley helplessly, "I didn't mean to make you mad again. Every time I open my mouth I seem to say the wrong thing. Listen, I didn't mean anything against this Berta. I was just thinking of your best good."

"I can take care myself—you needn't to think about me any way at all." She sat poised in the boat like a ruffled bird. "You mind your own business—thass enough for you to do."

"I reckon it is," admitted Wesley. "But, say, you don't really want me to take you back yet. Don't you think it's pleasant out here?"

"'S good enough if people don't get fresh."

It was not at all the sort of evening he had anticipated. He had meant to be superior, to talk down to this waif of the slums from the height of his class and his security. Here he was, scolded and put in his place like a schoolboy, and taking it meekly, coaxing her not to leave him. He shook his head and bent to his oars in silence.

Mareea was experiencing her frequent transition from anger to amiability. "Well, what about you?" she asked, tired of being still. "You got any mothers or

sisters or brothers? Where's your house? What you up to all day?"

Wesley explained in a subdued way about his family, his home. At the mention of land Mareea came alive. "How big a farm? Holy Mother, but I wish I had some land. A little piece no bigger as my hand would be good."

"I got near three hundred acres," said Wesley. "It's all worked, too."

Acres meant nothing to her. He had to use simpler terms. "You know how far we've come down the river? If that was one side and you squared it up it would be about as big as my place."

"But thass as big as Dru' Hill Park. You' awful rich, Mist' Din!" The respect in her tone was balm after his late flaying.

"No, I'm not rich, just comfortable, that's all."

"Any fella's rich with that much land. Say, you show me your farm sometime? Then I go back to Balt'mer an' brag around how I know a fella own as much as the park. Say, that'll be fun."

It occurred to Wesley that his determination not to go on the excursion had been heaven-sent. With his mother and Lucy out of the way he might very easily show Mareea the farm. He could bring her over in the evening after the men had knocked off work and gone home but before it was time for the excursion train to get in.

"Sure I'll show it to you. Some evening next week."

"What you grow on your farm?" demanded Mareea. "Tomato, yes, I guess that easy. What else?"

Wesley was becoming restless. Must he waste an occasion so wildly daring in dry enumeration of his crops?

"Don't let's talk about the farm. You tell me all about yourself, Mareea." It was the first time he had ventured to use her name. "A pretty girl like you don't have much trouble getting a lot of beaux, I reckon."

"Well," said Mareea reasonably, "most women what want a man get one. Me, I don't want one. I'm an old maid."

"You! Why, you're not more'n eighteen."

"I'm nineteen, nearly twenty, and thass an old maid for Italy. Italian girls get marry when they fourteen, fifteen. Ev'ybody call me an old maid—say I'll never get marry now. If my father had live', he'd made me get marry."

The marriage customs of Italy were unknown to Wesley Dean, but thus described they seemed to him barbarous. He suppressed his opinion, afraid of rousing Mareea's resentment again. "Why don't you want to get married?" he asked.

"Why don't you get marry your own self if you think it's good?" she asked in return. "Gettin' marry's all right for men, but it's fierce for a woman. Work an' babies, thass what she gets—yes, an' beatings, too, ever' time her man gets drunk."

Wesley blushed for her. That any unmarried woman —or any married one, either—should thus mention babies openly and boldly to a man shocked him speechless. It was simply beyond everything.

"All the girls I know 's old as I am," went on Mareea, unaware of his state, "all marry. They laugh at me for to stay single. Me, I laugh at them for to marry. I got my own money, I don't ask no man for a nickel. I get me new dress, dish ice cream, pair shoes when I want it. They have to honey their men silly to get a carfare, an' if they want any new dress—my, how that man holler murder! Me, I slapa face any man make such a fuss about spendin' somethin' for me."

No reticence, no romance. Brazen hard speaking tinctured with bad temper! If her voice had been less softly piercing, if the blue-starred night and the isolation on the water had not magicked him, Wesley Dean might have seen this. As it was, he only saw that his attempt to lead Mareea into tenderer paths had been a failure. But he began to have for her a solid liking and an interest quite different from the tremulous magnetism which had drawn him to this meeting. She was honest. She was as downright as a man. She had vigour and spirit and keenness. No girl he had ever met had talked like her. Belle Lucas and Manie Nichols and Lucy would have died modestly in their tracks before they would have come out with such a statement of the lot of a wife as Mareea had made.

It was his turn to chuckle. "Yes, I'll bet you'd slap anybody's face who didn't do to suit you, you little spitfire."

"I'd have a hard time reachin' up so high as slap your face, Mist' Din, you so big an' tall," teased Mareea.

"I better behave myself, I reckon."

"Don't behave yourself too good. Good people have it awful slow. Say, we better go home. That ol' whistle blow so early in the morning, an' I gotta sleep a lot." She yawned.

He was disappointed, but obediently headed the boat round. On the way back he began to make plans for the future. "You'll come out rowing again, won't you? And I'll fetch you some more peaches to-morra. The only thing is—lookahere, why can't you kinda watch out for me? I hate coming in the cannery and having everybody stare at me like I was a monkey. I'll just stand in the door and you watch out for me and come get the peaches."

"I'd watch out for the ol' devil himself if he brought me peaches."

"Say—you don't mean that. Don't you—don't you like me at all?"

The boat grated on the sand. Mareea stood up, balancing carefully, and prepared to jump. "Sure, I like you—but I like peaches, too."

"Wait a minute—you'll slip." He leaped past her, holding the painter in his hand. Then he turned and extended his arms. "Now——"

She jumped, stumbled, her soft body fell blunderingly against him, her warm hands clutched at him, and she laughed, her face close to his, the stolen ribbon brushing his cheek. He caught her up and held her for an ecstatic instant, kissed her twice, three times before she could wriggle desperately away. She said nothing, but thrust him back furiously, and the moment she was free she

ran along the beach and took the path toward the sheds like a wild animal released. He made a step or two after her, then stopped, swaying, drunk.

After a while he got back into the boat and rowed across to Sherwood Lucas's. The white dog met him at the landing place, watched him while he tied the rope, followed him while he sought Topsy, and watched him, growling low with satisfaction that he had gone, until she could hear the horse's feet no longer. She knew by dog instinct that he was not a responsible being, and she was glad to have him off her master's bailiwick.

Chapter Four

ALL the way home Wesley Dean felt Mareea against his lips, against his breast. Her roundness, her warmth, her softness stayed with him and hurt him. Unimaginative as he was, he rubbed his fingers together, laid his hand on his throat to be sure that it was himself, unchanged, and no other. Gradually the rhythm of his horse's gait, the night wind on his temples, soothed him and brought him up from the chaos where he had fallen. His mood swung up, too, into a neat conventional morality. He was ashamed of himself, but it was a class shame, a snobbish shame, rather than any penitential acknowledgment of his own lack of control. Why, man alive, he had been acting like the riffraff, the low underwash of the community, the whites who were less esteemed than the quiet and industrious negroes, the men to whom he nodded curtly without speaking, the women whose eyes he avoided when chance brought him through the mean ways where they lived. They were pariahs. And they were the ones who went out at night to meet canning-house girls. Suppose anyone knew that Wesley Dean was doing it, too. It would take a lifetime of living down; it would never be forgotten.

Then his honesty broke through his layer of petty smugness. Mareea wasn't low; he couldn't by any

stretch of fancy think so. And what she'd said about herself was simple and candid, nothing to hold against her. Her parents had died, and orphans, as Wesley knew, always had a pretty rough time of it unless they had kinfolk to take care of them. She hadn't a soul but that dirty old foreign woman. Mareea was just as respectable in the way she behaved as Belle Lucas. Yes, more so. Belle, his sense of justice reminded him, was forever letting her hand get in his way or drooping her shoulder against him or looking up at him so he could kiss her if he wanted to. Mareea hadn't done anything like that. The only reason he'd been wary about kissing Belle was that he knew, once he kissed her, he'd be hooked. She'd have him walking up the aisle in short order. He hadn't felt at all about Belle's advances as he did about Mareea's falling inadvertently into his arms.

He struggled for words to shape to himself the charm Mareea had for him. She was beautiful—an extravagant and affected thing for him to say, even to think, but still he had to say it, to think it. Beautiful. And she was so quick. Quick to laugh, quick to get mad. It dazzled him, her quickness. It made him feel as on rare times in Baltimore when, unknown to his mother, he had gone to a show and seen actors. He had felt a richness and flavour to life, as they sang and danced and talked grandly in the words of the play, that his own life lacked. He was always discontented after he had been to a show. And now Mareea nade him feel the same way.

He stabled Topsy and stumbled into bed. His mother and Lucy had gone an hour before, but Allie Dean had

left his lamp in the dining room burning low, and a piece of cake and a pitcher of milk stood beside it covered with a napkin. Usually when Wesley came in late he wanted something to eat. To-night he did not even see the waiting food. All he wanted was to be alone with his thoughts, to reason out this strange maze in which he found himself. But it was endless. He couldn't find the clue, and presently he fell asleep, tired of seeking.

He woke to a light and singing world, and in the first hours of the day, with the rush of early farm work, he dismissed Mareea and his parlous difficulties. Only when it was time for him to start to the canning house with the day's first load of tomatoes did she return. He had promised to bring her more peaches. Well, he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't even see the girl this morning. Then the whole thing would be over and he'd be out of it and at peace again.

Even while he was forming these brave determinations he had stopped at the supply shed and found a small basket. As he drove up from the tomato field past the orchard he went in to a peach tree, filled the basket, and set it on the seat beside him. He did not try to explain or excuse this act to himself. He simply did it under the direction of an unreckoned impulse.

He did not know what he expected when he got to the canning house, but, as he had told her to do, Mareea was looking out for him, and while he waited for unloading she appeared, looking rather serious but not offended.

His heart jumped and it hurt him to breathe. He handed her the peaches, careless of anyone who saw them.

"You're pretty nice," said Mareea blandishingly. "I didn' s'pose you'd remember any peaches for me. How you this mornin'?"

"I'm all right. How're you?"

"I'm aw ri', too. But, say, I'm gettin' to dispise these tomatoes. I almos' wish I hadn' come to work here. Say, you goin' to show me your farm sometime, maybe?"

"Next Friday evening—how'd that be?"

Mareea made a face. "Thass a long way off, Friday. You might forget it by then."

"You come out in the boat with me again to-night and I'll tell you if I forget it."

Mareea straightened her lounging attitude, flickered her eyelashes sharply.

"If I go, you behave yourself. No more huggin' an' kissin'."

He glanced about him now, in anguish lest such bold words be overheard. "I'll do anyway you want," he promised. "You better go back now." He turned to his team resolutely, and Mareea, a little astonished and not comprehending what was the matter with him, went back to Berta's side.

"My fella brought me some more peaches," she whispered. "They're pretty fine, heh? Wants me to go out on the river again to-night."

"You better not get too gay with that fella," counselled Berta. "These country jakes, they're no good.

What do they know? They work in the dirt and raise tomatoes, thass all."

"I wisht I worked in the dirt. But this fella, Berta, he's got money. He shouldn't be sneezed at."

"Did you ask him is he married? How d'you know he ain't got a wife and seven children along with the money? You better leave him be. But no—I know you. Any man cuts his eye at you you gotta run folla to see what he's like."

"Thass the on'y way I can find out. And if I don't like him I c'n run just as fast away from him."

"Girls are so smart. They know so much more as us old women. Wait till you seen the world like I have, you little fool."

"Berta, I think you crazy. Yestidda you was all for havin' me get this fella. Who stole Irma's reebbon for me to wear? Who heated up the hot water an' brought me the soap so's I should wash off the tomato stink? To-day he's no good an' I better leave him alone. You got as many minds as there is tomatoes in a bucket. I ain't nobody's fool about the men. I like this fella. He'd never beat his wife like Black Pete Kiljck beats Elisabet—and he's got more money. You wanted me to marry Black Pete, and you know he only took up with Elisabet when I wouldn't have him."

"Black Pete wouldn't 'a' beat you if you'd 'a' married him. You could twist that man like you twist that reebbon round your head last night."

"If he'd ever laid his hand on me I'd 've had the police on him."

"That's wild talk. Women don' have their men up for beatin'. Where does the rent money an' the food money come from if the man is in jail?"

They had argued this matter before, and Mareea would not go on. "Anyhow," she smiled, "Black Pete's marry Elisabet, an' I ain't got no fella, so it's right I should have this one."

"You ain't got no fella! Where's Frank Martucci an' Steve Putsta an' my nephew Jan Pavalek, an' that fella in the barber shop who give you the candy? An' the fella that followed you home from mass?"

"None of 'em ain't here, so what good are they? I guess you don't want no peaches, you talk Mist' Din down so small."

Berta pushed out a sulky lip and turned away crossly to her work. She was a glutton, and the threat that she might not share the peaches was the worst that could have been made. Mareea watched her mischievously from the corners of her eyes. She knew how to play on Berta, and when the old woman grew tiresome she teased her with some small thing like this to silence her.

The noise of the canning house, the steamy strong heat, the everlasting smell of tomatoes rose up around them, enclosed them, stifled their thoughts and feelings to sheer endurance. Their eyes grew dull, sweat ran down their cheeks and into their eyes, their clothes stuck to them, hot wet rags that tortured the body. But their hands kept on, peeling tomatoes endlessly, picking up and peeling tomatoes, emptying the bucket, pocketing the token, throwing the empty bucket

into the moving trough, snatching at a full bucket, and beginning all over again.

Once Mareea, raising her head wearily, looked out over the river. It would be good on the river to-night when this sweat and steam and toil were over for the day. And Berta needn't taunt her about her fellows. A girl had to have fellows. And since hers were all in Baltimore, so much the more reason to get a new one here.

Not that she thought of Wesley seriously. She would not have believed in the reality of the tumult she had raised in him. She knew that he was attracted by her, but she was used to men with that infection. He had brought her a gift, taken her rowing, and tried to kiss her, but that, too, was the natural procedure. All men did as much. She wondered if Berta was going to stay mad and refuse to steal Irma's ribbon again. If so, she'd steal it herself, only it wasn't so convenient. Irma's bunk was over Berta's, and Mareea's was farther down. If she hung round Irma's bunk it would look suspicious. Ah, well, she would bribe Berta with peaches, coax her back into a good humour, maybe slip into the grocery and buy her some sweet crackers or a bag of gumdrops. Berta would do anything for gumdrops.

She would have to wash again to-night—a nuisance. The stove and the wood provided by the canning-house owner for the use of his imported help were both poor. Besides, everyone wanted to cook and the heating of water merely for washing oneself became a matter of contention. Most of the women held that bathing was

putting on airs—you'd be just as dirty to-morrow, so why be clean to-day? But Mareea knew without telling that to go to meet Wesley reeking of her day's work would put an end to their acquaintance. So she must wash, no matter how many people yelled at her and cursed her and tried to tip her pan of water off the stove.

There was one thing that puzzled Mareea: she kept turning it over and over in her head. Did Wesley really own as much land as he had said? It didn't seem possible. If he owned so much he was rich and there was no need for him to drive his wagons of tomatoes to the canning house. But these country jakes were funny. Nobody knew what they'd do.

Black Pete Kiljck had made good money—he worked at Sparrows Point in the steel mills and drew thirty dollars a week. Big pay, thirty dollars. And the man in the barber shop, the Bardi's lodger across the hall from Berta's—he was always bragging about how much he made. Certainly he had gay clothes and rings and perfumery, and he was always ready to buy a girl a dish of ice cream on a hot evening. But Mareea thought him a braggart, and believed that he spent every cent he earned. These were the only men with any pretensions of being well-to-do that she had ever known, and neither of them actually owned anything more than the clothes on his back, the tobacco in his pouch.

The old land hunger of her father rose in her soul, and she wondered how it would be to work in the earth, to handle green things, flowers, vines. She would make this

Mister Din show her his land, find out if he was telling the truth. But her plan went no further. And the heat and the smell and the steady grind of the work presently stopped her thinking and planning. She became a part of the crude machinery of the factory. The hours, the day went by in a monotone of toil and discomfort from which there was no release until the whistle sounded its thin sharp note and the slowing of the engine, the stopping of the moving trough, slowed and stopped also the many pairs of dripping hands.

The women rose and stretched themselves to get out the cramp and sag of the day. Fingers stiff from holding the peeling knife had to be straightened. Bent shoulders shrugged. Some of the women put both hands to the small of their aching backs and twisted and turned for relief. They were too tired to talk. They trooped out heavily to the sheds.

Once in the air they began to revive. The stove was lighted and roundly cursed in the dialects of Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Italy, Bohemia. The pans and kettles were rattled about. They would make soup and the inevitable coffee. Some one of the younger girls rummaged in her bunk for a mouth organ and began to play; another sang a verse about a girl whose lover took her to the fair and bought blue beads for her, but she threw them into the cabbage patch and ran away with a jolly clown. Through and above and below the music ran the clicking talk, rising now and then to crescendos of emphasis. A child was smartly slapped, but the sound of the blows and the shrill scream of pain that followed

didn't turn a head in that direction. That was what children were for—to get slapped and to scream.

Mareea had gone over to the grocery as soon as the factory closed, and now she came threading through the mass of humans and their impedimenta until she reached Berta at the far end of the shack.

"Here," she said, thrusting a package at the old woman. "Somethin' for you. Will we have any supper?"

"You're my pigeon, my little white dove," exclaimed Berta, instantly ecstatic over the gumdrops and ginger-snaps. "Lie down in your bunk an' I'll get the soup."

The charm had worked. "Listen, what about Irma's reebbon again to-night? An' water for washin' myself?"

"Ev'ything, ev'ything. I'll get them all. You shan't do a thing. Hold my dainties till I come back. Eh, what a feast—peaches an' candy an' sweet cakes, after the soup an' the bread. We live like lords an' ladies here."

"Yes, in a grand castle." But Mareea did not laugh at her now. Berta was a good old thing even if she did have to be treated like a child.

Presently they ate, and then the old woman brought a bucket of hot water and her treasured cake of pink soap. She watched Mareea wash, and comb her hair, and put on her other dress.

"I wish I'd brought my new pink dress," said the girl. "I might as well, for thieves will likely break through our door whiles we're away an' steal ev'ything we got."

"I nailed the window, an' the door lock's strong, an' Emilia Bardi said she'd be watchin' out. If you'd brought your fine dress you'd be no better off, for here

you can't lock up a thing. And almost all here are thieves."

"Thass so. Allasame I wish I'd brought it. I look fine in that dress."

"To be vain is one of the seven deadly sins, little dove. You look fine enough. Here's Irma's reebbon; don't let the fat cow see it—put it on after you're away. She'll bellow after us all to-morra if she finds it's gone." Berta was amiability itself. Not another word of warning or rebuke. The gumdrops had done their work well.

"Do I really look fine? If we only had a lookin' glass!"

"Ah, ah, she goes out in the dark night where there are no street lamps but she must look fine! The foolishness!"

"A girl should look fine as she can when she goes out to meet a fella. An' such a rich fella, too."

"Is he rich?" Berta pursed an avaricious, sly mouth. "Then you get him. A rich fella don't come but once in a lifetime, an' if you don't grab him all the rest of your life is sorrow."

"Maybe! But if he ain't nice I don't care how rich he is."

"All rich fellas is nice. Don't you be a fool."

Mareea grew confidential. "He says he's got lots of land, big fields, garden an' house an' trees growin'. Cattle, too. D'you believe he's lying?"

"Why don't you ask the boss, that Jodie Bowers? He could know the truth. It might be so. Look at all the land round about. Somebody's got it."

"Mother of God, but I'd like a fella with land! I'd work my finger nails off to help him sow an' reap."

"I think you like this fella, Mareea."

"I like him well enough to find out if he's a liar about his land. An' now I go. Good-night, old woman. Don't get a stummickache on them gumdrops."

Chapter Five

It had begun to be whispered through the county that Wesley Dean, after a sane and sober youth, was cutting loose. No one seemed to know the particulars, but a whiff of comment blew through every neighbourhood gossip. People met him riding at night. Sometimes they met him driving in his buggy at night with a girl they did not recognize. The story drifted round to Belle Lucas, it was told with a pointed smile to Manie Nichols. "Was it you who was out buggy-ridin' with Wes' Dean last Thursday evenin' down the River Road?" when it wasn't you, and the questioner knows it, and knows that you know she knows it, is a maddening form of inquiry.

At first the two girls blamed each other. "Must've been Belle Lucas," said Manie coolly, "I was at prayer meeting."

"Manie don't go out ridin' in the evenin' with her hat off," or "No, she didn't laugh like Belle" piqued them into fierce curiosity which spread through their immediate families to the wider circle of their kin. Nobody knew, but everyone wanted to know. Sherwood Lucas, who might have enlightened his niece, kept a cynical silence. He didn't propose to mix up in anyone's

business but his own, and if Wes' Dean came by 'most every night and borrowed his rowboat—all right, so long as he brought it back and tied it fast again.

Belle was sensitive and high-spirited, Manie was sensitive and aggravatingly meek, but they were equally determined to find out who was their unknown rival. There was the matter of the approaching excursion. Belle had waited so long for Wesley to ask her that she almost lost her chance of another escort and finally had to take poor stubby Harry Carroll who was, according to her mother, "nothing but a pair of pants," the phrase indicating that though he was an unattached male he was the feeblest prop for any girl's reputation for popularity.

Belle would have lost even Harry Carroll if it had not been for Lucy, who took it on herself to stop at the Lucas's and mention, in the inevitable discussion of the excursion, that Wesley couldn't go because the farm work was so heavy and he was short-handed. It was a great shame, she added, and he was all upset over it.

Belle listened and agreed that it was too bad, but she gave Lucy a grateful good-bye kiss for the warning. She knew that Lucy would welcome her for a sister and that she wouldn't welcome Manie. Belle was afraid of Allie Dean—the older woman was always severe and cold with her, her eyes held enmity. Belle meant to have it out with Allie Dean if she married Wesley, and show her that she wasn't to be run over. In the meantime she dissembled, was deferential to Allie, toned down her gaiety before her, and kept out of her way as much as possible.

She was angry and roused that Wesley had retreated from the excursion, she was sure that his pressing farm work was only an excuse. It irritated her that she would have to endure flat little Harry Carroll for a whole long day, share her box lunch with him, listen to his jerky stupid talk, and parry his humble, dogged love-making.

Impulsively she determined to find out if Manie knew anything about this matter which was so important to them both. It meant putting her pride in her pocket—Manie would be sure to tell people that Belle had asked her—but Belle was past caring. She said nothing to her mother but went around to the Nichols' house and, as was the neighbourly custom in the morning, to the back door. Luck favoured her. Manie was alone in the kitchen baking cookies.

"My gracious but they smell good—I'd like to have that recipe," said Belle, outside.

"They're nothing but hermits—just like everybody's. Come on in." Manie was flushed from the oven heat, and her hair was in disorder. It made her less saint-like, more approachable.

Belle flung open the screen door and entered, perched herself on the table, and swung a slippered foot. She was blooming and gay in red-and-white print, and her white ruffled sunbonnet was like a hollyhock flower. There were no subtleties about her in appearance or speech. She went straight to the point.

"Look here, Manie—who's this girl people say Wes' Dean's beauing around—d'you know?"

Manie's flush became a mortified scarlet. She thought

Belle very bold, downright coarse. "No, I don't know," she said confusedly, and stooped to the oven door to look at her cakes, quite unnecessarily.

"I'd give a pretty to find out. Haven't you any idea at all? Could it be somebody visiting? Or maybe somebody from over at the Corners?"

Manie's curiosity overcame her embarrassment. "If it was anybody visiting we'd've heard of it. I just can't imagine. Everybody's talking about it. You're so thick with Lucy—hasn't she said anything?"

"You're so thick with Mrs. Dean—hasn't she said anything?" answered Belle, mimicking. Then, more conciliatory: "No, Lucy's not said a land's living word. And you know—that's an idea—I'll ask Lucy right out when I get a good chance." She hesitated to give such confidence to Manie, whom she considered deceitful and sly, but finally she blurted out the rest of her story: "Lucy stopped in and told me he wasn't going on the excursion, said it was farm work, but I don't believe it. Do you?"

Manie wriggled uncomfortably. "I don't like to accuse a church member of telling a falsehood."

"Oh, don't be so darned pious. Everybody makes excuses to get out of things. You know very well he could go if he wanted to. He always has, every year before this, long's I can remember."

"Do you think—that Mrs. Dean—and Lucy—know—he's going round with somebody?" asked Manie. "If they don't—well—she mightn't be—real respectable!" Manie whispered the word, it was so terrible.

"Only, we mustn't say unkind things or suspect people without reason," she added quickly.

"I hadn't thought of that. It's not like him. He's never run with any real wild crowd." Belle swung herself down from the table. "I *am* going to ask Lucy, that settles it. If she doesn't know, well, then we can be pretty sure Mister Wes' is up to some devilment. I always thought —if he'd let himself go——"

"Belle, don't say such awful things, don't. It's our duty to pray for him."

Belle flung back her handsome head and laughed so hard her sunbonnet fell off.

"All right, Manie, you go ahead and pray. I'll snoop around and let you know if your prayers are needed. Oh, Wes', you rascal! And I hadn't suspicioned a thing until you gave me the hint, Manie."

"I never did! I never thought of such a thing!"

"You came so near it, it was just as good."

"But I never—don't you dare tell anybody I did, Belle Lucas."

Belle was still mirthful. "Only Miss Becca Stewart and Mrs. Tom Emerson and one or two of their cronies. They'll keep it very secret."

Manie's eyes filled with tears of vexation. "If you do, I'll tell everybody you came here asking about Wes' and insinuating he wasn't straight," she cried.

Now Belle quieted. "I was only joking, don't be silly. The less we say about this to anybody the better, but I'll talk to Lucy. And I'll tell you what she says," she offered magnificently.

"Oh, will you?"

"Yes, and if you get a good chance you might sound his mother, though I don't believe you'll get much out of her. Will you do that?"

"I'll try to. Mrs. Dean's not anybody to ask questions of, though."

"I'd as lief ask 'em of a bear. All the same, she might be interested to know that her darling boy's out buggy riding 'most every night with a strange girl, if she don't know it already. You put it to her some easy way. Now I'm going to run. Do give me one of those cakes—they make my mouth water."

She went off munching the warm, spicy cookie, leaving behind her an agitated Manie, but a gratified one. Belle must have been mightily wrought up to have come round to her so frankly. Manie went on putting cakes into the baking pans, and the corners of her narrow lips curved up with content. Content with a dash of malice. She was far more sly than Belle thought her.

Chapter Six

Wes' Dean had no idea of the pitch of interest he was rousing. Night by night he went to meet Mareea, either in the boat or to take her driving in his buggy, which she preferred, because it went faster. Night by night her magic on him strengthened. She was not like Belle, she was not like Manie, she was not like any other girl in the world. She alternated, at her whim, with laughter and chatter or provoking silence. If she did not wish to talk, she would not. If she did want to, she would. Often she horrified him by the words she used, by her hard, experienced view of life. Sometimes she amused him by her utter childlikeness, her ignorance of things that were everyday to him. But more and more, no matter what she did, no matter what she said, she bound him with chains. He could think of nothing else.

The project that was big in his mind was to take her to see his home on the day Lucy and his mother went on the excursion. Mareea had teased him so, had told him that she didn't believe he had any land, any cattle, that he borrowed the horse he drove; he was stung to prove to her the validity of his possessions, even though he knew she was only half in earnest.

He made the plan exact. She must leave the canning house early, before the quitting-time whistle, and come

down to the beach, where he would wait for her with Sherwood Lucas's boat. They would row across the river, drive in his buggy to his house, and he would show her his possessions. Wesley intended to follow the back roads—it was the first time he had taken her out before nightfall. He would have to chance meeting people he knew, but the back roads were little used save by the negroes, so he felt fairly safe. About his own field hands he worried. His tenant and foreman, Tom Bowers, cousin to Jodie at the canning house, had been for years on the Dean land and in the Dean employ, and he was free of speech to Wesley's mother. If he saw anything, said anything—well, the fat would be in the fire. So Wesley arbitrarily sent Tom to mend a break in the far pasture fence, a pasture they were not using, a break that had been there for a month. He said that he intended to put the young steers in there soon, and, anyway, he didn't like his fences down, it looked slack. If he fancied that Tom eyed him suspiciously he quieted this fancy with the thought that he had nothing to suspect him of. Tom would never, in his wildest thoughts, divine what Wes' was about to do.

Tom would go to mend the fence late in the afternoon, and would go on home to supper, not coming back to the stables for the feeding or milking. The negroes would do that, and if they saw Mareea it did not much matter—they would think she was some friend of Lucy's whom Wes' was showing about, or a cousin on a visit. Even if they knew who she was they would not talk to any white folks about it. Negroes were secretive,

they didn't tell what went on in the places where they worked.

Yet it all made him nervous, for he was unused to deception. Lucy and Allie Dean drove off in the morning in the dayton wagon with a big box of lunch. They would leave the team at the livery in town and meet their friends at the station. Bob Tracy would be there, to beau Lucy for the day, driving in from over Greensboro way. Allie would join the older group, the class leaders and Sunday-school teachers. They would take the special train provided for them and have a two hours' ride to the beach. They would not be back until eight or nine at night—excursion trains were always late. So Wesley plotted the time, minute by minute, eager and feverishly anxious. It was so daring, so outrageous, this bringing a girl like Mareea into his mother's orderly treasured dwelling. It savoured of heresy and schism, social anarchy, he had a heavy realization of the madness of his intention and was again amazed to find himself capable of such stark folly.

When Lucy, leaving, said to him, "I do wish you were going, Bud—'twon't be half the fun without you," he answered her with desperate sincerity, "I wish I was going, too." By the simple act of mounting into the dayton with them he might cut away this whole strange coil of circumstance he had tangled round himself. But he could not. He watched them drive off with a mixture of relief and dread.

After they had gone he fidgeted, fumbled through the hours. By mid-afternoon he was off to Sherwood

Lucas's, and he was halfway there when he remembered that he had forgotten to eat the dinner his mother had prepared for him. The unexpected physical hollowness increased the stress of his nerves. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead again, and his wrists, too. He wondered if he might be coming down with a fever.

It was an agreeable surprise to find Sherwood and his intelligent dog away from home. The shanty stood open and deserted. But the boat was there, and Wesley untied it thankfully and pulled for the beach in flurried haste. If Mareea were only early, too, they might get back before Sherwood returned and thus be spared his eyes. . . . A little schooner tacking up the river with a load of oyster shells for road-making nearly ran him down, he was so absorbed in this hope, and its skipper, a battered and jocose man, addressed him profanely: "You tryin' to c'mit sueycide, you goddam S.O.B.? Whole goddam river fer you and yer goddam little boat and you hafta nag round me! You ain't no sailor, you're a farmer. G'wan home an' milk yer cows, goddam you!" And other phrases of like import which Wesley did not answer.

On the beach he walked back and forth looking at his watch every time he turned. He twitched with impatience, and timidity engulfed him. "I never was the fella for this sort of enterprise," he told the river. "I don't know how I ever come to get me into this." The twenty minutes of waiting for Mareea became eternity to its dregs! Yet she came before the time agreed on, and at the very first warm round tone of her voice his impatience, his timidity, his reluctance flew away.

"Say, look at me, I got a new dress. Berta an' me set up two nights makin' it. Ain't it fancy?"

Cheap calico, little black sprigs on a creamy buff the tint of her skin, a full skirt with a ruffle, puffed short sleeves; nothing could have been better. Her parted hair lay in smooth black scallops, a lacquered frame for her big eyes. Berta had washed her white stockings, and if her shoes were coarse, her feet were small. She was perfect, compact of youth and summer and singing blood. The eternal gold earrings of the Italian finished the picture with a touch of the fantastic.

Wesley could hardly speak to her, so struck was he by her loveliness. His heart responded to it, his eyes drank it up. The divine, irresponsible rapture that he felt on blue summer days when he rode Topsy through the golden heat and moved with her pace in tune with all the world caught him again, made him gape at Mareea and smile foolishly. He wanted to run races and shout, fling up his hat. He wanted to snatch Mareea and spin her round, rumple the shining jet of her hair, hear her laugh with him.

"I gollies," he sighed at last, "if you looked any nicer I'd have to eat you up."

"Like one of your peaches, so!" She champed her jaws as if taking terrific bites, satisfied by the effect she had produced.

"Let's get along," he said, recollecting the purpose of their meeting. "Canning-house whistle might blow." He was at ease now, all his tight, stiff inner self loosened and set free. Now everything would go fine! There'd

be no slips. He was confident, he even forgot to be hungry.

"Say, Wes'," chattered Mareea, "you wouldn't believe how I had to wash myself gettin' ready to come. I had to scrub! Those tomatoes! And the sweat!"

"Don't say 'sweat'," he corrected her.

"What shall I say when I mean sweat then?"

"Ladies say 'perspire'."

Mareea nearly tipped over the boat with laughter. "Oh, Mother of Jesus, does he think I am a lady! Sweat, sweat, sweat, sweat, sweat . . ." she repeated it fifty times. Then, mocking—"Lad-ies—say—'per-spire'!"

"Well, they do. They don't say 'sweat.' And they don't say 'Mother of Jesus,' neither."

"You feelin' awful smarty all of a sudden. You don't like the way I talk I go back to the tomatoes and the sweat, sweat, sweat, sweat, sweat."

"How'll you go—swim like a fish?"

This banished her annoyance, set her laughing again. It was the pointless absurd gaiety she roused in him that most endeared her to him. At home Allie Dean didn't hold with foolishness, and if Lucy and Wes' carried on too high, she stopped them. Mareea had no repressions.

Presently they reached the landing, and Mareea would have lingered to explore Sherwood Lucas's shanty. "Le's look in the funny little house," she begged.

"Aw, come on—s'pose he was to come back and find you pokin' round his things. Maybe he'd say you wanted to steal something."

"Maybe I do—what's he got?"

"Nothin' but dirt, I reckon—Sherwood's bached it here so long they say he eats his food raw to save the trouble of lightin' a fire. No, don't go in—he's funny. He don't like women."

"That ain't funny—that's misery."

"Well, 's no use stoppin' here, for there's nothin' to see—besides, we got quite a ways to ride. We'll not get there before dark if you go pokin' into all the old shanties we come across."

Mareea suffered herself to be persuaded. It was more fun to ride than to look at a dirty old house. She got into the buggy and seized the reins. "Let me," she said, "this once. Before you always say 'no' because it's night, but now it's not night."

"You can't drive. Besides, this is a shying horse."

"I can drive." They tussled for the reins, and at last Wesley gave in, surprised by the power in the shoulder and arm she opposed to him.

"I wouldn't use my strength against a woman," he said loftily. "You can drive if you want to and don't try any funny business."

"'Funny bizzyness,' 'funny bizzyness,'" chuckled Mareea. "I can do anything I want no matter who tries to stop me."

She sat very straight and important and guided the horse with quick skill—for a mile—and then thrust the reins at Wesley. "I can't see ev'ything if I'm drivin', so you can do it now. I want to see the land an' the trees an' the flowers."

A massive twist of trumpet vine along an old rail fence, red banners of bloom flaunted to an unheeding world, made Mareea shriek with delight. She flung herself from the buggy to get the flowers, and came back with a dozen clusters and bent all her attention to twine and group them. Red lilies and cardinal flowers in a marshy place entranced her.

"But all these don' grow wild?" she demanded, and was inclined to doubt Wesley's word that no one had planted them there.

They came up to the main road through a sweet pine wood and they had not met a soul. It was but a little way to the Dean place, and Wes' turned in at the gate with a flourish. "This is where I live," he said, trying to appear casual.

Mareea gazed, eyes stretched, lips open. "All these fields belong to you? My Godlemighty, Wes', you one rich man."

Wes' had pursed his mouth to tell her she must not take the name of the Lord in vain, but she went on excitedly, "What's that growin'—potatoes? Millions of potatoes that must be! An' what's that?"

He explained that it was wheat stubble with clover coming up through it. She glowed with excited attention. She chattered, she pointed, she gestured and exclaimed, her voice running up and down the scale of its soft notes. Wesley was pleased and flattered.

"It's just an ordinary farm," he said, "just like all of 'em hereabouts."

But Mareea would not have it so. It was an estate, a

prince's estate, a place of grandeur, magnificence. They drove down the lane, past the house—"We'll see that when we come back," said Wesley—past the barn and the stables—"As much as a whole town!" exclaimed Mareea—and back through the fields and orchards, past the tomatoes, at which Mareea made a face and spat naughtily, down to the used pasture, the wood lot, the pond. There Wes' turned about lest he should encounter Tom Bowers. Then nothing would do for Mareea but she must get out and walk the way back.

"But it's so dusty, you'll spoil your shoes and stockings," he said.

She dropped down on the path beside the farm road and in a moment her feet were bare. "There, now! I walk like my mother, my grandmother, all my grandmothers!"

Wesley was fascinated but alarmed. "Yes, but look here—you'll get your feet all over dirt."

"Well, ain't you got a pump at your house? I'll wash 'em off. Mother of Jesus, I might have all my grandmothers right along with me, you such an old woman. Shut up—didn' I tell you I have my own way?"

He got out of the buggy, too, and walked back beside her, the docile horse following, his nose at Wesley's shoulder. Mareea was supremely happy, she ran in the dirt, she kicked it before her in a dusty cloud, she laughed at the sun-warm feel of it.

"Now come look at the house—it's getting dark," said Wes', edging her past the barn. The men would be in the stables, feeding the horses and mules, or milking

the cows in the pound, so they wouldn't see Mareea from this side. Still he breathed more freely when they reached the porch.

If Mareea had been impressed by the land she was submerged by the house. The number of its rooms and the size of them, the solid furniture, the neatness, the cleanliness, the polish, Allie Dean's linens and china amazed her, awed her to silence. She looked at it all carefully, fingered each object, must sit in each chair, see herself in each glass.

"It's grand," she murmured from time to time, "grand!" She dropped the bunch of trumpet flowers on Allie Dean's white knitted spread the better to note its intricacies. "I bet Berta could make one like that," she said, her eyes sparkling. "She crochets awful good."

Wesley had followed her upstairs uneasily. It was strange to see her in these familiar surroundings. She did not suit them. A spark of his uncertainty returned. "Don't leave them flowers there," he reminded her. "My mother'd have a fit. She's awful particular about her room."

"It's a grand room," answered Mareea, obediently picking up the flowers. "It's a queen's room. I never seen such a room."

She looked at Wesley with a touch of the respect and awe she paid to his belongings. He was the owner of all these glorious things. "Maybe I shouldn't have come in here with my dusty feet," she said. "I go right down and put on my shoes."

She ran downstairs to the pump, washed her feet with

vigorous thoroughness, dried them on her petticoat, and put on her shoes and stockings forthwith. The family cat rubbed around her and she beamed. "Say, what a sweet pussy! Godlemighty, he purrs like the engine at the canning house." She gathered the cat in her arms, fondling it, and the silky gray beast snuggled against her, pushed his head up under her chin, padded her with his round feathery paws.

"Don't you stick your pins in me," she warned him. "You got a pin in every toe."

Wesley followed her, watching her, uneasiness increasing. Had he, Wesley Dean, actually brought a girl from the canning house into his mother's house and let her run all over it? He pondered his aberration with fresh astonishment. He must be out of his head.

"Say, Wes'," said Mareea, putting down the cat, "I'm hungry. Anything to eat around here? Just bread or anything."

He had not intended to offer her any food, but it was impossible that anyone under his roof should tell him of hunger and not be fed. Moreover, at the reminder, his own emptiness became insistent.

He lighted the kitchen lamp and opened the food safe, a wooden cupboard with perforated tin doors. There was his uneaten dinner and much more besides. Ham, cole slaw, potato salad with boiled dressing, apple dumplings, and a pitcher of sauce. Bread and cake were in separate compartments. Mareea clasped her hands. "I never seen such a lot to eat! Berta would die of joy to be here."

"I'll bring in some milk and butter out of the spring house," said Wesley. "You take the stuff and put it on the table. It's all cold, but I guess we can make out."

Mareea set the dishes of food on the kitchen table, sampling bits of everything. The cake she handled reverently, taking it out and then putting it back. It did not seem possible that Wes' could cut into anything so magnificent just for her. But she sniffed longingly at the icing and put the tip of her tongue against it, first glancing round to see if he was coming back.

"Better as candy," was her verdict, and she would have licked it again, but she heard his step outside. He had a pitcher of milk, a print of butter, a square glass dish of cottage cheese.

"Say, we don't eat in the kitchen," he said, at sight of the table.

"Where, then?" asked Mareea, amazed.

"Why, in the dining room, of course, in at that door. Aw, I forgot to light the lamp in there."

There was one place laid on the table, the place Allie Dean had left for her son's dinner, and Mareea laid another, patterned on it. They carried in the food and set it about. Wes' brought glasses and poured the milk.

"Wasn't there any cake?" he asked.

Mareea stared. "Only one, fancy like a weddin' cake, all chocolate. Are we to eat that?"

"Of course."

She ran to get it, clapping her hands, and placed it in the centre of the table.

"This is too grand," she declared. "Too grand, too

much, too swell. I bet your mother don't want you to eat on that cake. It must be for a party, a feast."

Wesley was growing impatient with hunger. "Sit down and begin, can't you? I'm nearabout starved. Here, hold your plate." He heaped it with meat and salad, pushed the bread and butter near her, then filled his own plate and began to eat.

So did Mareea, her eyes shining. They ate in silence, intent on the food, like hungry children. The first edge gone from their appetites, they glanced over their plates at each other and smiled.

"Say, I could've et a steer," said Wes'. "Have some more salad, why don't you? Here!" He would have heaped her plate again.

But Mareea had intentions on the cake. "I want to save some room for that," she said, pointing to it, "if you really mean to cut it an' wasn't just foolin'."

He wiped his knife on a slice of bread. "I'll show you if I was fooling." He cut out a huge wedge, slipped the knife under it, and drew it out. "There, try that."

Mareea picked it up with both hands and bit into it. "I never in my life taste' anything so swell," she said thickly, her mouth full. "It's a grand cake, grand!" She bit again greedily, smacked her lips.

"Yeah, Mother sure does make good chocolate cake," said Wes'. His hunger was appeased, he was enjoying this. Mareea in the soft lamplight was more lovely than ever, glowing, beautiful. She had her elbows on the table, and he saw how round they were and with what entrancing curves her hands bent at her round

wrists. Her throat, too, was round, and her neck was enchanting. Pools of dark laughter were in her eyes, and her earrings flashed merrily as she turned her head.

"This is pretty nice, eh, Mareea?" said Wes'. "I reckon you know now I wasn't telling you any story about my house and my farm, don't you? I reckon you'll believe me now when I tell you something."

"Oh, you got a grand house, a grand place, Wes'. I was kind of mean maybe to say you was a liar, but you know how it is—so many fellas talk so big and got nothing. I don't believe none of 'em."

"Excepting me."

"Ceppen you. Say, could I have another piece of that cake?"

"Sure, all you want." He cut another slice for her and one for himself. There was intimacy in all this. They had never eaten together before except some little treat of fruit or candy or peanuts he had brought to the boat. Here she was, familiarly at his table, sitting in Lucy's place—it was an adventure piquant by its concealment, doubly enjoyable for its strangeness.

"What you laughin' at, you big fool?" asked Mareea amiably.

"Say, I was just thinking, if anybody come along and saw us here, well, the whole county'd buzz like a swarm o' bees."

"What for? It's your house. You ask me to come and see it. Thass aw ri', ain't it?"

"Well, now, if some fella in Balt'mer was to ask you to come see his house like I did, see—would you go?"

"I should say not. That would be bad, ev'ybody on the street would talk mean about me."

"Well, that's it. Everybody would talk bad about me, if they knew you were here."

Mareea sparkled. "Ha—but they don' know! All these country jakes, what do I care if they talk? I know you aw ri', Wes', yes, an' I know I'm aw ri', too. Let 'em talk, then—brrrrrrr!" She snapped her fingers to show how little she cared.

Wes' leaned back in his chair, at ease. The meal had restored his courage, his confidence. Mareea, chattering and gesturing, was as good as a show. Again he was conscious of how much he liked her, and of how, over and beyond that, she held his attention as a personality. There was something about Mareea . . .

"Here we sit," he said teasingly, "eatin' supper together, nice and quiet under the lamp, nobody round to interfere. Might think we was an old married couple, heh?"

"Oh, no—nobody'd think we was married. We laugh too much."

"So you think gettin' married's a serious business, do you? Mareea, tell me, honest—you got a beau in Balt'mer?"

"I got a plenty beaux. One ain't never enough for me."

He drew his chair nearer, caught her hand. "No foolin' now—d'you like me as much as any of your other beaux?"

"Say, Wes'—you like me better as your other girls? You tell me that first."

Her hands were warm and soft and moist. She leaned toward him, her lips parted—they, too, were soft and warm, and red, curved with her smile. He came still nearer, caught her other hand, and her eyes seemed so big, so deep. He was drowning in her eyes. He forgot that he was playing. His body grew taut, his voice choked in his throat.

"By God—I like you better than any other girl in the world. Look here—Mareea—come here to me——"

He became suddenly conscious that she was rigid, that she was staring wide-eyed over his shoulder. He loosed her and swung round in one quick movement. His mother stood in the doorway, and behind her was the glimmer of Lucy's white dress, the shine of her amazed eyes.

Chapter Seven

THE four of them stayed thus for a still, terrible moment; then Mareea got up and faced the other women. Quicker of wit than they, she comprehended the scene and what had led up to it.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "You are Wes's mother—I know it. You don' want me here."

Allie Dean came into the room now, slowly, like a woman in a trance, but Lucy stayed outside, scared and trembling. "Who are you?" asked Allie Dean. "What are you *doing* here?" She spoke to Mareea, but it was Wes' who answered.

"I asked her to come and see the farm this afternoon —and the house. And we were hungry—so—we had some supper."

"This was why you wouldn't go on the excursion," shrilled Lucy at the door. "And she—she must be the girl you've been going round with at night. Belle Lucas asked me to-day who it was—and I didn't know—I didn't guess——"

"You needn't to talk as if it was bad," broke in Mareea, flaming at the accusation in Lucy's voice. "I could not go out in the daytimes—I was at work. There wasn't no harm. You needn't to look at me so!" She flung up her head regally.

"Then why," said Allie Dean, in a thin cold voice, "why were you two hugging and kissing here to-night, sneaked in behind my back? Wes', speak up. Who is this girl? If you ain't ashamed to tell——"

"You needn't be so high," said Mareea, "I am nothin' to be ashame' of. I am Mareea Gianelli, an' I live to Balt'mer, an' I am here workin' in your cannin' house down at the river. There it is all. Mother of Jesus, what do you think? You look so funny! I am no bitch of the streets, no more than you and your daughter."

Allie Dean clapped her hands over her outraged ears. "Go on upstairs, Lucy," she commanded. "Go right this minute. You can't stay here and listen to such low talk."

"It is the truth and not low talk, you old fool," cried Mareea. "Ask anybody. Don't you get fresh with me or make believe I'm no good. I show you." She advanced belligerently.

"Shut up talking to Mother like that, Mareea," said Wes', coming to himself. "She didn't mean anything against you. It's my fault, the whole thing. I oughtn't to've brought you here like this, and I know it. Mareea's all right, Mother. She works in the canning house like she says, and I saw her down there and got acquainted with her—and I knew how you'd feel about it so I asked her to come here the day you and Sis was away. There's the whole story, and I'm to blame. Don't lay anything on her."

Mareea had stood glowering, like a cross child, but now her face cleared. "Say, I'm sorry, too," she said

penitently. "I always holler out like that over nothin'. I don't blame you gettin' mad, find a stranger in your house, so. An' such a grand house, all full of fine things. I never saw such a grand house." She was as willing to make amends as she had been to fight. She smiled her most cajoling smile at Allie Dean.

But the older woman did not respond. She moved stiffly to her sewing chair and dropped down in it. "I can't understand it!" she said. "I can't believe it. You—Wes'—to bring a——" She looked at Mareea, her youth, her alien vividness, her wagging friendliness, and her heart failed her. Here was something utterly unknown, here was someone she could neither influence nor frighten. Any right-minded girl in such a situation would have been ashamed and cried, would have tried to get away. Mareea seemed more than content to stay and brazen it out. It was evident, by every rule of feminine propriety known to Allie Dean, Mareea was not right-minded.

But she was not vitally concerned with Mareea. Let her go her own wicked way, stew in her own juice of sin and indulgence. It was Wes's wrongdoing that agonized her, tore at her conscience and her sensibility. With so many other mothers she had put off thinking of her boy as a man, with a man's desires, a man's passions. He would marry and have children, yes, well and good. But before that he would "go with" only decent girls and would be as free from any taint of looseness as Lucy. He was her nice little boy. He *must* be.

And now!—she was sure his relation to Mareea was

the basest. That the girl's mirth and vitality, her impulsiveness, her childlike quick enjoyment of the moment, her changing, wilful moods made an escape from his own less colourful nature and more rigid mould, his mother could never have been made to understand. There was only one thing any man wanted from a girl like Mareea. It made her sick with loathing, but this she mastered. It was her plain duty to deal with this matter as became a lifelong church member, a leader in class meetings, a woman respected for her religion, a mother responsible for the saving of her son's soul. She summoned all her strength to do this, fighting down her nausea.

"I want to hear the truth," she said sternly; "the whole truth. Where've you been meeting her, Wesley?"

"I've not been meeting her any place. I just took her out boat-riding now and then, and in my buggy."

"And how long's this been going on?"

"Couple weeks—little over."

"Say, you goin' to let your mother hold a p'lice court on you, Wes'?" asked Mareea, her anger rising again. "All this—it makes me awful tired. I'm goin'!"

Allie Dean turned on her. "The sooner the better—that's the first word of sense you've spoken, miss. You can walk right out of that door and keep on going as far's you want."

"You can't walk it, Mareea," broke in Wes'. "I'll take you back in the buggy. I kep' it hitched."

Allie Dean stood very tall and forbidding. She forgot the natural caution of her nature. Anger and outrage

stifled her love for her son. "If you go out of the house with that girl, Wesley Dean, you're no child of mine from that moment. I cast you off for as long as I live."

"Say, you don't need to go with me, Wes'—I can find the road. I don' mind walkin' in the night. I ain't scared. Your mother's got ev'ything all mixed crooked. She'll think better in the mornin'. Don't go against her. It's a great sin to go against your mother." Mareea's voice was generous, kind. She hated to hear Wes' blamed and scolded. And the scene irked her—she wanted to get away. This was no loud-yelling, scrambling, tussling fight such as she was accustomed to see and to take part in, a fight that left no hard feeling, signified nothing. This was cruel and quiet. She did not like it.

But Wesley and his mother did not seem to hear her. They stood silent, measuring each other as they had never done before, antagonists feeling for the other's weakness, waiting in a desperate stalemate—for Allie Dean could not believe that Wesley would defy her, and Wesley could not believe that his mother would be so arbitrary, so unfair. She made the mistake of speaking first.

"Don't let me think you're a throw-back to old Joshua Dean," she said provocatively.

The sting of allusion to the family reprobate was all he needed. "I'm going with Mareea. You can think—and say—and do—whatever you've a mind to."

She did not stir until Wesley, with his hand on Mareea's arm, had left the room and she heard the sound of the buggy being driven away. Then she dropped to her knees.

"Oh Lord God, refuge of the broken-hearted," she prayed aloud. "Look down on Thy servant this night and give her Thy strength and Thy comfort in her hour of trial. My son, my poor weak child, tainted with the blood of wickedness through no fault of his own, and caught in a snare set for his soul by a low and shameful woman." She began to sob, but went on—"Scourge him with whips of scorpions, chastise him with Thy wrath until he shall come to a knowledge of his depravity, make him to forsake the path of wickedness and the way to destruction ere it is too late! Let him not fall, O God, to the bottomless pit where Thy goodness and mercy may not prevail on him, but loose him from the——"

"My goodness, Mother, what are you doing?" asked Lucy, opening the door. "And where's Bud—and where's—that girl? I waited and waited and waited, and then I came downstairs and listened, and all I could hear was you praying."

Allie Dean got up from her knees and wiped her eyes. Mechanically she began to clear away the table, still set as Wes' and Mareea had left it.

"I'll just get this food out of sight and put things to rights," she said.

"You haven't even taken your hat off. Where's the lunch basket? I must've dropped it on the porch as we came in. Mother—what happened? Who *is* she?"

"She's one of that pack of nasty dirty foreigners down at the canning house—didn't you hear her say so?" There was such fury in Allie Dean's face and voice

that it checked Lucy's curiosity, warned her to be still.

The two women worked together until everything was in order. Lucy put out the kitchen light. In the dining room she hesitated.

"Going to leave this lamp lit for Bud?"

"No, put it out. I don't know if he's ever coming back."

They went upstairs in the dark without another word. Usually the door between their rooms stood open, but to-night Allie Dean shut it. Lucy must not know that she would sit by the window all night and watch for Wesley's return.

The assured soul who talked on terms of equality with her Creator, the woman in authority who made laws for her household—these receded into the mother who has discovered that her son is no longer wholly hers and is rent by grief and jealousy. Allie Dean moved restlessly about her room in this unaccustomed turmoil of feeling. Her foot touched something on the floor, and she stooped to pick up one of Mareea's withered trumpet flowers.

"He even brought her in here," she thought. "He even brought her in here, in my room. She must've made him do it." Her heart pounded and thumped with rage, choked her with its violence, and she said a word she had never used before in her life, a word she considered wholly vile. "The hussy!" cried Allie Dean aloud, and flung down the soft flower as if it seared her hand.

Chapter Eight

BREAKFAST was a dour affair. Wesley had come in before midnight, but he had not slept much. He ate in glum silence, his eyes on his plate. Lucy was too scared to speak. Allie Dean, austere and self-righteous, moved from the kitchen to the dining room with coffee and hot cakes as usual, but she might have been alone in the house for all she noticed the others. The summer morning outside, blithe with freshness and sun, mocked their tragic attitudes.

Now and then Allie Dean stole a glance at Wesley but found him hard to read. He looked like his father in one of his obstinate moods; he was older, less boyish. Seeing him thus, and remembering the flower in her room, Allie Dean's anger could not be repressed. When Wesley rose from the table and snatched up his field hat she stopped him.

"We might's well have this out," she said. "Where'd you and that girl go last night?"

"I thought," said Wesley slowly, "that I wasn't any son of yours if I went out of the house with her."

"What do you mean, Wesley?"

"What do you mean, Mother? It was you said it, not me."

"Are you aiming to turn me and Lucy out of here

and bring that"—she hesitated and then let him have it viciously—"that hussy here?"

"Can't make much difference to you what I do if I ain't your son."

"Don't take that high-and-mighty tone with me, Wesley. It'll do you no good."

To this he did not reply, and Allie Dean unwisely returned to the attack. "Well, can't you speak? Are you going to promise me to leave off seeing that girl and behave yourself?"

Wesley took off his hat and deliberately sat down, deliberately crossed his legs, deliberately spoke: "I'm not a-going to promise you anything. I'm a man grown, not a child, and I don't perpose to be bossed and hectored around like this, not even by you, Mother. I been as good a son as I know how, and you got no cause to get so heated over this, nor to call Mareea names. She's as nice a girl as Belle or Manie, she's as nice a girl as Lucy, even if she's not had much bringing up and works in the canning house. I'm sorry I brought her here, I'll say that much, but there wasn't any real harm if you want to keep on with this highty-tighty you can do it—but I won't be a party to it. I've said my say."

"Oh, Wes'," cried Lucy, "you talk as if you really liked her."

"Well, I gollies!" exclaimed Wesley. "Of course I like her. What d'you suppose I was taking her round for if I didn't like her? You got the queerest ideas." He started to the door. "Now I'm going on—it's pret' near seven o'clock."

"No," said Allie Dean, "you wait a minute. You don't propose to be bossed and hectored, Wesley. Well, I don't propose to have any son of mine make a low beast of himself and act with no respect to his mother and sister by bringing—by sneaking—a girl like *that* into our home—right up into our rooms"—the injury rankled— "whilst we were away. Choose which you'd ruther have—us or her. I mean it."

"You said you meant it last night, and now you're chewing it all over again. What's the use of carrying on like this? It don't get you a thing off me. Mareea—Mareea's all right, I tell you. This ain't no hanging crime."

"It's a crime against decency and morality—and your immortal soul. I say again—which would you ruther have—us or her?"

Wesley stalked to the door, his face black. "I'll let you know pretty soon," he said violently, and flung out of the house.

"Oh, Mother," cried Lucy. "What's he going to do?"

Allie Dean compressed her lips. "I don't know, but I'm not worried. Give him a little time by himself and he'll come to his senses. Now, child—the work's waiting. I'm going to give my room a cleaning."

"I wish you hadn't gone at him so hard. I'm afraid he might do something he'll regret."

"He's done full and plenty to regret already. He must've been out of his head! But, land, every man goes out of his head when he gets in the clutches of a bad girl."

"But, Mother—maybe she's not so bad. Maybe she's all right, like Bud says."

"No, he's only trying to put the best face on it, so he's added lies to his heavy burden of wrong doing. She's a bad lot. Look at the way she was got up."

"I thought she looked kinda pretty—she didn't have on anything but a calico, and it was made queer, but it suited her, someway."

"Flowers stuck in her hair, hoops in her ears like a play actress or a gipsy fortune-teller. Don't talk about it any more. Bud'll come round. Go along out to the spring house and tend to the milk."

When her mother called Wesley "Bud" Lucy felt the tension relaxed. She went out, reassured. She had great trust in her mother's authority and wisdom.

Meanwhile Allie Dean took brush and broom and soap and mop and prepared to purify her room from Mareea's contaminating touch. She stripped the bed and put the bedding to boil. She hung fresh curtains. She rubbed the already polished furniture and wiped the woodwork. There should not be so much as one fingermark left to remind her of who had been there. She wished that she could change everything Mareea had looked at.

Lucy had finished the straining and skimming, washed the pails and the stone pans, and set them to sun on the shelf outside the spring house. She was busy with the breakfast dishes, and her mother was still at her cleansing processes upstairs.

There were steps on the porch, and Wesley banged open the screen door and came in. He was pale and tense and sombre, harshly determined. With him was Mareea, barefooted, in her dirty canning-house rags, strong with the canning-house stench, her smooth hair the only thing in order about her. She was a Mareea somewhat abashed yet with a covert gleam of triumph. And amused, too, as if this was the oddest, drollest move that life had yet offered.

"Where's Mother?" said Wesley. Not waiting for Lucy's reply, he lifted his voice and called: "Mother—Mother—come here."

Allie Dean ran downstairs at the summons. Wesley put his hand on Mareea's shoulder and pushed her forward, looking at his mother. "We've just come from the preacher's. We're married. This is Mrs. Wesley Dean."

Allie Dean turned faint and cold, she thought she was going to die. But she lifted her head proudly and spoke at once. "Lucy—you get your hat. You and me'll go over to Mr. Perry's and ask him if he'll take us in town —or over to Uncle Nate Saulsbury's," was all she said, ignoring Wesley and his wife.

Wesley felt a pang of disappointment—his sensation, his great rebellion had fallen flat. His brilliant coup of assertion hadn't come off. The impulse to strike back at his mother, to wound her and put her in her proper place, that had sustained him so far, unaccountably faded, and he found himself feeling humbled and sorry and bewildered. He did not know what to do next.

Mareea stepped forward, gathering Allie Dean's intent more quickly than did her son.

"Don't go off," she said. "Why do you go? I know this is Wes's house and his lands, but he owes some duty to you. Mother of Jesus, do you think I want to drive you out?"

"You made sure Wes', not me, owned the place before you married him, I see," remarked Allie Dean.

"But of course I did. That was only sense. Do I want a mother-in-law to be like a factory boss? I got my life to live as well as you. But don't you go away. No need to do that." She saw that Allie Dean wavered, looked at her questioningly. She felt that there was good reason behind this indecision, and in this she was right. Nate Saulsbury, the proposed refuge, Allie Dean's uncle and her children's great-uncle, though nearest of kin, was far from being the dearest. He was a cranky and bad-tempered old man, miserly to the point of squeezing ha'-pennies. He would give Lucy and Allie a grudging welcome—might even refuse them shelter if he was in one of his sour moods, and if he did deign to take them in would make his charity a constant humiliation. Allie Dean was caught between two millstones, and they ground her hard.

"Look," Mareea went on wheedlingly, "here are your fine things, your tables, your chairs, your linens. You don't want to go off an' leave them. An' say, I'm not so bad when I'm cleaned up an' in my good dress. You try stayin' on here with me—I don't want to cut this house in two."

She was mistress of the situation—Mareea, shrewd with a latent peasant shrewdness, fair, but far from abject. She was meeting Allie Dean as an equal, for all her rags and dirt. And if she had met her in any other way she would not have won.

"If I should stay on a while," said Allie Dean at last, "it'd only be for Wes's and Lucy's sake, to hush up the awful talk there'll be. And if I do stay—I've got to have the say about running the house."

"If you don't get too bossy, I don't care," said Mareea. "I ain' the one to be bossed around an' hollered at nor treated hateful, I tell you now. But, Godlemighty, I ain't afraid but I can take my own part if I have to."

"Don't *say* that," broke involuntarily from Allie Dean. "Don't curse when you're talking. It's enough to draw down a judgment on you."

"I didn't curse. Whassa matter with you? I don't never curse except maybe a little bit when I get mad at somebody." Mareea was not offended but honestly puzzled.

"She means don't say 'Godlemighty' and 'Mother of Jesus' when you're talking," broke in Wesley. "She don't like it."

"Oh, pooh—that! What a fuss over nothing! Listen —I say what I like—yes, an' I do what I like, an' nobody better tell me to stop. This is funny, to stand jawin' here so long, I think. Missis Din—do you go or do you stay? Better stay."

"I don't even know your name," said Allie Dean.

"Thass soon fix'. I'm Mareea Gianelli—now Din.

Mareea Din!" She glanced at Wes' and smiled winningly. "Thassa firs' time I say it. Sounds fine. Now—why do you go? 'S a lot better if you stay."

Allie Dean had been thinking hard. Anything was better than leaving her home, going to beg a place with kin, facing the eyes and tongues of the town. She must get over the shock of all this first, pull herself together. She gave her decision firmly.

"I suppose it's my duty to stay till the nine days' wonder dies down," she said. "And I think—the first thing—Lucy better take you upstairs and lend you some other clothes."

"An' I will wash. Mercy of God, I smell no more that cannin' house. What a fierce stink on ev'ything! What you goin' do, Wes'?"

"I'm going to get to work. Lost enough time this morning with everything dragging and behindhand."

He went out without another word, glad enough to be spared his mother's certain—if delayed—reproaches and prophecies of disaster for his strange and sudden marriage. He had rushed off in his blind rage and done this thing and had not bettered his independence or authority. In the cool interchange of understanding between his mother and Mareea he had been ignored, pushed aside, made a nonentity. It was disquieting. He didn't feel that he'd put his mother in her place, and he didn't feel the least bit married. And yet—to-night there would be Mareea, young and laughing and soft, in his arms for his wife. Not such a bad business, after all. He

flung himself into the belated waiting work with a curious zest.

Back in the house Lucy led her new sister-in-law upstairs as one might lead a muddy and fearsome dog. She was afraid of Mareea, she wanted to cry for the disgrace of having such a low character, such a piece of trash in the family. She could hardly grasp the fact of the marriage. She stood as far from Mareea as the room would permit and did not look at her except with veiled, startled eyes.

This did not abash Mareea. She stared about her appreciatively. "You got a fine room, too—I didn't come in here yestiddy—just peeped in through the door. Say, where'll I put these things?" She stripped off her clothes in a way that made Lucy blush all over. Lucy had been taught not to leave her body uncovered even when alone—a bath was the sole excuse for nakedness. But Mareea! Lucy fled the shameless sight.

"I'll fetch you up a bucket of water," she said breathlessly, and closed the door tight.

When she came with the water she would not enter. "There's some clean underclo'es in the second bureau draw'," she said, from outside. "And stockings. Let me know when you're ready for a dress."

She ran downstairs to her mother. "Oh, let's go over to Great-uncle Nate's or anywhere," she begged with tears. "Let's get away. It's like having a tramp in the house."

Allie Dean pinched her lips hard, patted her daugh-

ter's shoulder. "Don't go on so, child. Better try to get along. You know how it'd be over at Uncle Nate's. And if we went to town we'd have to get a room somewhere, and people'd worry us crazy talking. Don't you see? We might go visiting round, other relatives after Uncle Nate—but what kind of way to do is that? No, we're better off here, hard's it is."

"We're not. It mightn't be pleasant staying round with kin—but they're our kind of people. She's not."

"Then," said Allie Dean, with finality, "we've got to make her into our kind. She's lawfully married to your brother, and he owns this farm. We've got to face the facts. He can turn us out any time he's a mind to. And I don't intend to leave my good house and my goods and chattels for that dirty minx to mess over and ruin. If we set our minds to it we can get her to looking respectable and talking respectable and acting like a human being, and maybe she won't be so bad." The words choked her and she broke out with her true feeling: "Goodness knows what sort of scum she is, nor what sort of blood's in her. It's a burning shame and disgrace. But there—it's done. They're married. And I'd cut off my right hand with this here bread knife if only they wasn't."

"Lucy," called Mareea from the head of the stairs, "you goin' to loaned me a dress?"

Lucy wiped her eyes and went up the stairs at a martyr's pace. As she came into the bedroom she saw how Mareea had splashed the water round her neat washstand and rumpled and soaked her towels. She went to the closet and took out a blue cotton dress,

almost new, but one she had never liked. "Maybe that will fit you," she said coldly, and began ostentatiously to put the washstand in order.

"Mother of Jesus, but it's tight," giggled Mareea, struggling with the buttons. She glanced at Lucy and noticed her swollen eyes. "I guess you don' like it that I get marry with Wes'," she said. "I guess you feel pretty mad at me. Well, it was queer. I didn't think to marry him, myself, an' last night when he took me back to the shed he never said nothin' about it, an' God knows I didn't, for I hadn't no idea of it. But this mornin', just when I'm settled down to work, he comes burstin' in like he was loony an' grabs me by the arm an' makes me come outside, an' he says we're going to get marry right off an' he won't hear to my puttin' on another dress, nor sayin' a word to Berta, nor nothin'. He just pushes me into the buggy an' drives off, whippin' on the horse."

In spite of herself Lucy was interested in this story, told with the utmost drama. Mareea made her see it. She turned to listen. Mareea took her advantage and went on vividly: "That ol' man, the preacher, he was surprise' to death. He start to speak kinda sharp to Wes', but Wes' says he's not to talk but to marry us. An' his wife come in, fat, her eyes poppin' out like a guinea pig held by the tail, an' she look at me an' she look at me till I say to her, 'You never see anybody get marry before, I guess,' an' she get red to the face an' mad as the devil, an' the minister marry us an' we come out an' come here. Say, I'm just as surprise' as you are,

honest I am. I never think when I wake up this day that I'm goin' to get marry! And never in my life did I expec' to get marry like this, in dirty clo'es, no company, an' no feast! It's like somethin' crazy. But look, I don't want you to feel so bad."

Lucy struggled with the truth and with her own pliability. Mareea had disarmed her. She became more kind. "That dress is too tight for you," she said. "Take it off and I'll find you something else. I don't think blue's your colour, neither." She rummaged in the closet.

"I'll go back to the shed an' get my own things this aft'noon," said Mareea. "I got other clo'es. In Balt'mer I got more clo'es, pretty nice ones. I'd 've brought 'em if I'd 've known I was goin' to get marry, you can bet. I got to see Berta, too. She'll be all upset that I don' come back to her."

Lucy held out a pink-and-white lawn, candy-striped. "That'll be becoming to you, I sh'd think. And here—here's some shoes."

She was surprised to find that Mareea's foot was smaller than her own, but she had a pair of slippers not much too big. In the pink dress Mareea was bewitching. Even to Lucy's prejudice, she did not look so different now. And she was good-natured, determined to please Lucy, whom she liked.

She preened before the mirror. "I look fine. Hold on, Lucy, don't you clean up for me—I'll do it. Say, what to do with these old rags—take 'em downstairs and wash 'em to kill that stink of tomatoes?" The old rags were the clothes she had taken off. She tried to make the

room neat, imitating Lucy, but she had little of the deft, sure motions of the true housewife, and she knew nothing about how to care for a room like Lucy's. Still, she did her best, agreeably.

Now they went downstairs, presented themselves before Allie Dean. "This was all I had that was big enough for her," said Lucy, to explain why she had given her one of her best dresses. Allie Dean was surprised almost to the point of approval. "You look real nice," she said. "I'll get right to work sewing you some things."

"I can sew," said Mareea. "Not very good. Berta, she mostly sews for me." She looked about her restlessly. "What am I goin' to do? Give me some work. If you work, I must work, too."

Allie Dean and Lucy exchanged questioning glances. What task could they set this oddity to do? "I've got to go down to the garden to gather vegetables for dinner," said Lucy doubtfully. "Of course—that dress—but with an apron and a sunbonnet I reckon it'll not come to much harm. And it'll wash."

Mareea put on the apron, but refused the slatted cape-back bonnet Allie Dean offered. "No—that thing's too hot. Smother me all up."

She followed Lucy to the garden, sparkling with interest. All this, all this richness, this plenty, was now partly hers, sealed and cemented to her by that hurried, absurd ceremony of the morning. Already she was dressed in good clothes. What if they were only borrowed? They had been paid for by her husband. But she

thought of Wes' very little in her delight at this new domain.

Peas, silvery green on brush sticks, lima beans hanging thick on slender rough poles, sanguine-leafed beets, melons, onions, cabbages, turnips, carrots in ample plots—Mareea looked at them carefully. "Lotsa weeds," she commented.

"The men can't keep it clean whilst the farm work's so heavy."

"Men! This is women's work, a garden. I tell you what—you go on pick the stuff you want—I pull up these weeds." She seized a giant taunting ragweed and upended it. She liked the rank acrid green smell of it, the stain on her hands. "Ho!" she cried. "This is fine!"

Lucy looked ruefully at her dress—there wouldn't be much left of it if Mareea was going to mess in the weeds. But she said nothing. It was a relief to be alone, and she retired to a remote corner of the garden and turned her back. When she had filled her basket she went to the house. Her slight liking for Mareea had died down.

"She's out there weeding like a hired man," she reported helplessly to Allie Dean. "I thought she might's well stay if she was satisfied. Oh, Mother—isn't it just awful!"

"She'll get a stroke working in that hot sun without anything on her head. I'd oughta made her take the bonnet."

"Make her! You can't make her do anything. She's like a—a pig."

"There's no use talking thataway. She's your brother's wife."

"I don't care if she does get a sunstroke. Mother—will we have to take her to church with us to-morrow? I'll die if we have to do that."

"Don't cross that bridge till you come to it. You may have to do lots of worse things."

"I *despise* her," cried Lucy passionately. "Foreign trash! Wes' might's well've married a darky."

"Hsh! It's a heavy cross laid on us, and you can't bear it if you show that spirit. Go easy, child." Though she spoke with resolution, she was far from feeling it. Lucy's resentment and anger were as nothing to the tumult in Allie Dean's heart and soul. But she held it back, waiting. "If I c'n only get through the first few days, the Lord'll show me the way," she thought when Lucy had left the room.

So at noon Allie Dean herself went out for her daughter-in-law. "Maria!" she called. "Come in to dinner." She was surprised at the extent and the thoroughness of the weeding.

"You after me? You say my name so funny?" said Mareea, bobbing out from among the bean poles.

"Maria's the way we call it," said Allie Dean firmly.

Mareea did not dispute her at the moment. She was rumpled, and her hands were stained green and black, but she had not really soiled Lucy's dress. She washed with vigour at the pump and came hungrily to dinner. "That smells good," she said appreciatively. "Want me to help?"

Lucy and Allie Dean were dishing up beets, potatoes, beans, and boiled meat.

"No, you go sit down at the table," said Allie Dean. "We can manage best alone."

It was a rebuff, but Mareea did not notice or care. Her morning in the garden had been a delicious change from the cannery. She was still inclined to be pleasant, so she smiled archly at Wes' as he stamped in.

"Hello," she said. "Hello, Mist' Din. I cleaned up your veg'tables slick this mornin'. How about that?"

Wesley had forced himself to come to the house for dinner in the most apprehensive of moods. He had been wondering what was going on in those quiet rooms, whether Mareea had made open battle with his mother and what the upshot might be of this whole mad business. He had alternated between pride that he'd shown spunk enough to marry the girl and shame for the slight he had offered to his mother. Wesley Dean knew his mother very well. He could understand her almost before she spoke, and before this, even when she irked him most, he had been tolerant and yielding. It was hard to fight her, she was so certain she was right, she had so many ways of making him feel foolish and insignificant. If she had not been so unjust last night, if she had not doubted his word—and he had always been scrupulously truthful with her—if she had shown even a little belief, a little trust, he could not have rebelled. Well, he'd done it now. He was married. And marriage was, to Wesley Dean, by tradition and association, a covenant to be broken by nothing less than death.

He did not feel like a bridegroom. He, like Lucy, had suffered a change in feeling, a variation in mood since the morning. Mareea, dirty and reeking of canning-house refuse, was assuredly not his ideal of a wife. Misgiving smote him strongly there. He tried to think of her as she had seemed to him in the dusk of their clandestine meetings, but when he lifted his hand and smelled the pervasive rotten odour left there from holding to her hand, he cringed mentally. And there was her temper, and her frightful language, which were as alien to the Dean standards as her Brescian ancestry was to his English yeoman forbears. He imagined the wildest, direst scenes.

To find her then calm, even gay of manner, and prettily dressed, sitting at table while his mother and sister brought in the dinner without sign of conflict among them, was a surprise and relief almost ludicrous. He gaped at her silently.

"Whassa matter?" she asked. "Ain't it all right for me to fix up the garden?"

"Oh, yes," he said at last. "Sure, if you want to."

"I like it. All a time I was out there in the hot sun I kep' rememb'ring my father an' how he cry he can't get no land to work on. I'll bet he looks outa heaven or purg'-tory or wherever he is an' laughs fit to kill to see me."

Mrs. Dean had brought in the last dish and taken her accustomed place at the foot of the table. Lucy was already sitting down. There was an expectant pause—grace could not be said while Mareea talked. As she stopped Mrs. Dean bowed her head.

"Our Heavenly Father, bless this food to our use and us to thy service, Amen," she said in a loud clear voice.

Mareea turned, caught the idea of prayer from her mother-in-law's attitude, and made haste to bow her head, adding a final flourish by crossing herself.

Allie Dean saw this gesture and turned white with horror. "Are you—you're not—a Cath'lic?" she asked Mareea tremblingly.

"Sure, what else would I be? Not a very good Cath'lic. The priest, he scol' me because I don' make confession like I ought."

Allie Dean put up one hand over her mouth to keep from crying out. To her rigid Methodist mind a Catholic was a being branded and apart. The few in the community she bore with, because she had always known them, but she had little truck with them. They were the remnant of Cavalier settlers and inclined to such light ways as card-playing, fox-hunting, and a general social levity frowned on by her Church. Still, they were not cast out from her acquaintance: she pitied them rather than condemned. But that she should find a Catholic a member of her own family—there was a blow so appalling that she could not rally from it. She looked at Wesley in helpless appeal. Mareea, unconscious of stigma, was helping herself to her dinner with appetite.

Wesley also felt the shock. His mother's stand as to Catholics was his own, though modified in practice, for it was impossible to make scarlet creatures of such good fellows as Dave Willoughby and Charlie Dukes. But he had never dreamed of marrying a Catholic girl. He had

not thought at all of Mareea's religion. There she sat, the lovely dark creature, her golden hooped earrings swinging over her thin pink frock, eating beans and potatoes with hearty relish, and looking as innocent as the cat in the rocking chair. Yet by her own lips she had branded herself as one who bowed down to idols, a slave to Popish superstitions! He was as helpless, though not so stricken, as his mother. It seemed best to temporize.

"I never thought nothing about it," he explained. "I don't believe there's much use in saying anything now. She might like to change, if it was put to her right."

This was artful, for it touched his mother's special zeal. At revival meetings she was always one of the older women chosen to make personal appeal throughout the congregation to those who found it hard to come to the altar. Allie Dean was very successful in bringing forth reluctant converts, she enjoyed the exercise of her powers and the compliments it brought her from her pastor and visiting evangelists. The chance that she might wean Mareea away from Popishness and bring her into the one true fold had its attractive side and soothed her agitation. Wesley followed up his advantage.

"You can't hurry her, though," he said. "She's real quick and touchy. But by'n'by, when she gets used to everything——"

"Say," broke in Mareea, "I wanta go back to the cannin' house this afte'noon an' get my clo'es an' see

Berta. Berta, she'll cry an' be all upset that I'm marry an' leave her. I got my pay comin' to me, too."

"Oh, gracious," cried out Lucy, "I can't bear to think you worked in that place. What people are going to say! I tell you right now, Mother, I'm not going in town for a month—maybe more."

This blew by Mareea. The importance of neighbourhood gossip was something she had yet to learn. But Lucy had been kind to her, and she knew herself the cause of Lucy's distressed voice and eyes.

"Don' you get mad at me, Lucy," she said, with her nicest smile. "You look so sweet and cute, like a little picture hung up in a winda, I don't want you to be mad an' sorrow. Godlemighty," she added with a sigh, "this is a funny kind of a weddin' day, seems to me. 'S more like a funeral. At home we make a big feast for a weddin', an' there's a party an' singin' an' dancin' an' ev'body gets good an' drunk. Thass some fun. An' the bride she's got a white dress an' white slippers an' a wreath, an' all the other girls wear red an' yella an' flowers in their hair. But, look—there I was in my dirty old dress, not fit to see, an' that old preacher's house all dull an' dark, an' his fat cow of a wife standin' there lookin' at me so mean, more like that thief of an Irma than a real lady."

"Goodness only knows what Mrs. Cameron thought, let alone what she'll tell," mourned Lucy.

"They're not so much—only Prot'stants," offered Mareea in scornful consolation. "We oughta had a

priest, Wes'. An' a high nupshal mass, an' you an' me all dress up like a real bride an' groom. You shouldn't rush at me so this mornin'."

That a Catholic might look with aversion and contempt on a Protestant was an idea so new to the Deans, so remote, that they let it pass unanswered. But Mareea's plaint about her clothes touched Wesley's pride.

"I'll buy you all the dresses you want," he promised. "Silk dresses, as good as anybody's. I never did like Mrs. Cameron much," he added irrelevantly.

"Silk?" asked Mareea, wide-eyed.

"You won't need but one silk, for best," interposed Allie Dean. "You got to have some plain calicos and ginghams for morning, and a lawn or two for afternoon, and a cloth dress for the fall."

"She needs a hat and shoes and stockings," said Lucy. She wouldn't mention underwear before her brother. "Mother, couldn't we go down to Easton and buy the things so the people in Eden wouldn't know? I couldn't bear to go into Mr. Blackiston's store, or Mis' Sisk's millinery, and ask—they'd guess right away, and there'd be plenty to spread it round. Imagine Belle and Manie—oh, it makes me sick when I think of the talk!"

"Let 'em talk," said Wes' hardily. "They'll be clacking about something." But he looked blank and troubled. It wasn't pleasant to think of people saying Wes' Dean had married a wife without a rag to her back and that he had had to outfit her.

Mareea had followed all this keenly. "I got a-plenty clo'es in Balt'mer," she announced. "I don' need lots more. Only—they ain't here."

"If we'd thought of it earlier," said Allie Dean, "you two might've gone off on the boat to-day to Baltimore and got Maria's clothes and had a—a—little wedding trip"—the word stuck in her throat—"and if she needed anything more you could've bought it there."

Lucy seized at the suggestion, bettered it. "If they drive down to Easton they can catch the boat at midnight round the Point," she said eagerly. "Oh, that's a good idea. Don't you say so, Wes'? You could go to Miss Sallie Downes's boarding house, and Miss Sallie'd help you shop. Oh, my—I think that's the one thing to do. Time you're back the talk will have died down."

The iteration of the gossip theme irritated Mareea. "Who's talkin'?" she asked. "What'll they say? They can't say nothin' bad about me an' speak the truth. Don' nobody ever get married here that it makes so much talk? What you scared of? Talk don' break no bones."

Wesley had been considering the Baltimore plan—he would be glad and thankful to get away. "Don't you want to go on a trip on the steamboat, up to the city, and get your clothes?" he asked her much as one dangles a sweetmeat before a pouting child.

"And buy some new ones?" added Allie Dean. "You'd have a nice time shopping in the city."

"I don' care," said Mareea. "I'd rather stay here an' work in that garden, but I oughta get my clo'es. I don'

want to wear your things allatime," she added to Lucy. "Besides, your shoes too big for me, slip on my feet."

"I'll go out and tell Tom about the work and hitch up," said Wes', "then I'll be right in and shave and dress."

"What's Maria going to wear?" asked Allie Dean. "Think she could get into your gray challis, Lucy? That pink's not suitable for travellin' or the city."

"But wait," said Mareea. "I got to get the key to our room from Berta. I got to see Berta an' tell her about what I done. An' I want my money from that Jodie Bowers."

"You'll have to stop by the canning house, then," said Allie Dean bitterly. "You'd better make haste, Wes'. I'm going to pack you a box of lunch in case you don't have time for supper in Easton."

Something definite to do, coupled with the prospect of postponing the adjustment to the strange new situation for a few days, gave them all a fictitious ease. Again Lucy took Mareea to her room and found other clothes for her, offered her best hat, her light cape. Allie Dean was busy in the kitchen, buttering biscuits, slicing meat, packing cake and fruit. Wesley hurried out to his men and back again and presently could be heard splashing and thumping about in the manner common to men dressing in haste.

Mareea, though acquiescent in the arrangements, was suspicious. Dark thoughts underlay her mind. She wasn't at all sure but this might be a plot to get rid of her. Perhaps Wes' was going to take her to Baltimore

and there abandon her. She sucked in her red under lip meditatively and determined not to let him out of her sight. And if he tried to give her the slip—she'd run for the police. She put her marriage certificate inside her dress waist and pinned it securely when Lucy wasn't looking. Mareea knew that a marriage certificate was a woman's sure weapon. She reflected that if Wes' got away she could come from Baltimore to Eden alone easily enough, and once landed she could find her way to the farm. And let them try to throw her out! She'd start a fight such as would make the little affray with Irma seem the beginning of love! She was the wife of a rich man, and if his family meant well by her she'd mean well by them. If they were up to dirty tricks—they'd better look out.

These suspicions largely died away when she saw Wesley, clean-shaven and handsome in his gray Sunday suit and best boots, his blue tie in bright accord with his blue eyes. He was a husband to be proud of, and Mareea gave her marriage certificate a reassuring pinch and conjured up a smile. Lucy's mirror had told her that she, too, looked well, a real lady in Lucy's challis and black hat. Ah, it was clever of her to have married a rich young man! She began to be excited at the prospect of walking into the canning house and asking for her money, trailing her borrowed finery before Irma and the others. How they would stare! How their tongues would run to-night! She was sorry that she couldn't be there to hear it. And old Berta—Mareea hoped she wouldn't cry and be too miserable. She'd ask Wes' to

stop at the grocery and buy some gumdrops for old Berta.

"You all ready?" asked Wes'. "Come along, then. Where's that box of lunch?"

"Give it to me, clumsy, I'll take care of it," said Mareea, laughing up at him.

He looked down at her, and the adventure of it all, the nearness of her smile, made the blood mount to his head. She took the shine off Belle and Manie and any other girl he'd seen. Why, she was a little beauty! And his wife! Forgetful of his mother and sister, he caught her in his arms and kissed her twice before he swung her into the buggy. "Here we go, Mrs. Dean," he said boisterously. He put his arm around her as they drove away.

But Mareea did not forget to say good-bye. She leaned out and waved to the two grave women standing on the porch. "Goo'-bye," she called. "We be back pretty soon."

"Did you ever!" exclaimed Lucy. "Such carryings on! I wouldn't've expected it of Bud. Disgusting! My! but I'm glad they're out of the house. It's just too awful to have her round. Mother, I want to tell you she's got a temper. She was as glum and stiff with me upstairs—you might've thought I wasn't doing her a kindness to let her have my clothes. I was sort of afraid of her."

Allie Dean set her lips. "She's common, through and through, that's what she is. I only hope she's not worse. But he's married her, and that's all there is of it. Oh, Lucy, I never thought to see this day! Even if Wes' had married somebody I didn't quite like, say Belle Lucas,

it would've been perfect compared to this. I'd rather seen him laid cold in his coffin than caught by such a raggle-taggle. I been quiet and calm all day, but I can't hold out any longer. It's too much." Her body began to shake, she went on hysterically: "All my nice things, the furnishings I had as a bride, the things Mother left me when she died, and Great-aunt Ella, and the things that come from your father's family, all the good tablecloths and bed linen and fine quilted comforters and blankets, the silver spoons, the gold-edged china—what'll this little slut do with 'em all? And a Cath'lic. Crossing herself right at my table. If Mr. Cameron had known she was a Cath'lic he'd never have married 'em." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

"Don't, don't, Mother. She's not worth it, neither's Bud, indeed they're not. Don't cry like that—you'll tear yourself all up, you'll make yourself sick."

"I wish I was sick—I wish I was dead before I'd seen this day."

"Mother—that's a sin! Don't—don't. Why, she's nothing but a child in lots of ways—we can easy get her to go to church with us and forget all about being a Cath'lic."

"She's no child—don't you fool yourself. Look at the way she faced me down last night—yes, and this mornin', too. And didn't you say only a minute ago you was e'en a'most afraid of her? She's a woman grown and a hard character, or I miss my guess. Oh, Lucy, how could Wes' ever have done this wicked, wicked thing!"

"He got so mad this morning, he wasn't himself."

"The good dutiful son that he's been to turn on me like this! And going off with his arm around her, bold as brass."

"Well, they're married," began Lucy doubtfully. "Mother, don't cry so hard, you'll come down with a fever." All her life a clinging and dependent person, it was hard to assume the rôle of consoler and comforter. Moreover, her mother, having given way to her grief and rage, showed no sign of abating them.

"He was a son to be proud of, he was one of a thousand. I used to look at Cousin Fanny Covey's son and the Towers boys, and the Barneses and feel sorry for their mothers that they weren't like Wes'. So straight and tall, and open in his ways—he was better looking than your father as a young man, Lucy, and Will was considered handsome. But Wes' was taller, and broader shouldered, better built——"

"Mother, you talk like he was dead. Don't, for mercy's sake."

"He is dead—the best part of him. He's killed his better nature, marrying like this. What can a man do with a wife who's not got a thought nor a wish nor a liking that's kin to his? Oil and water—Wesley the good clean water and she the muddy, sticky, roily oil! My Father in heaven, why didst Thou lay this heavy cross upon Thy servant? I am as Rachel mourning for her children and refusing to be comforted."

Suddenly she became quiet, dried her eyes, pulled up her shoulders. "I'll not let go again," she said.

Lucy followed her into the house. "I feel like I was fifty years older'n I was yesterday," she complained. "Mother, you go lay down a while. I'll tend to the work."

"I believe I will," said Allie Dean. "I'm all gone."

"Bob Tracy's coming over this evening," went on Lucy peevishly. "What I'm going to say to him I surely don't know. I'm ashamed to look him in the face. And he'll be the first of many. The whole neighbourhood will be round to get a glimpse of the curio Bud's married. Oh, Mother, let's go over to Great-uncle Nate's and sound him out about staying there. Maybe he'd see how we feel and be ready to help us."

Allie Dean shook her head. "Don't waver round so, Lucy. First you say one thing and then you change your mind. You know how Uncle Nate'd act, as well as I do. He's always been contrary and cross-grained, and the most pleasure he has is other people's troubles. He'd torment us beyond reason—and we'd have to take it if we was under his roof. No, I said I'd stay here and I'm going to. And whoever comes, you hold up your head and don't let 'em poor and pity you. If Bob Tracy says anything you remind him of his Aunt Deb who run off from her husband with the pack peddler."

"Did his aunt run off with a pack peddler? When? I never heard of it."

"It was a many years before your time, but she did it, all right, though the Tracys let on she'd gone out West for her health. There's precious few families but's got a rotten spot somewheres. Little did I think where we'd

get ours. Little did I think that Wesley, my own boy who I brought up to walk in the paths of righteousness, Wesley——" Her chin began to quiver, tears again brimmed her eyes. "What have I done," she cried out, "what have I done, O Lord, that Thou shouldst so chastise and humble me?"

"You haven't done nothing, Mother, no more than Job did in the Bible. He maintained his integrity before God, and I don't see why you shouldn't do the same. Needn't blame yourself for Bud acting like a perfect ninny."

But Allie Dean found no comfort in her likeness to the arch prototype of trouble.

Chapter Nine

The news of Wesley Dean's marriage spread through the town of Eden and the country round about like fire through stubble. The pair had scarcely left the parsonage when Mrs. Cameron ran across the street to tell Mrs. Nichols, so that Manie was one of the first to hear. From the Nichols family's gratifying amazement and indignation Mrs. Cameron went on to other leading Methodist families—it seemed only fair that the Methodists should hear it first, since it concerned a member of their church. It was the most enjoyable day ever inserted in the dull and correct life of Mrs. Cameron. Delicious to scent such a scandal first, to have been present at the very peak and culmination of its scandalousness.

"In the filthiest old dress you ever saw and smelling of the canning house so bad I had to put up the parlour windows and shake the curtains. Yes, and barefooted—not even stockings! And no hat! A regular I-talian girl, as true as I'm sitting here. I couldn't believe my eyes. Wesley was all wrought-up looking—but determined, oh, my, yes. But she wasn't flustered a bit. You'd have thought she was as good as anybody. And the way she spoke to me—ugly and rude—well, all those foreigners

carry a knife, they say, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she had one. . . ."

The story went on and on. But always each instalment was punctuated by an awed voice saying, "What's Allie Dean going to do!" Then there would be silence for a moment. Of all people, Allie Dean, high-headed, self-contained, ultra-pious, to have a canning-house girl for a daughter-in-law!

Jodie Bowers and the other men working at the cannery were besieged for information. "Aye, jiminy, to have somethin' like this happen right in the middle of the season's enough to make a man jump in the river," lamented Jodie. "I can't get home to my meals for people full of questions, ladies specially. An' that ol' woman Berta bawlin' all the time, and them foreigners jabberin' away and lettin' the work go slack, and nobody drivin' up with a load but must come in and chew it over to me and ast me what Mareea was like and how long Wes' had knew her, and this and that and the other. I don't know nothin'! I didn't see 'em carryin' on. Outside of a coupla rows she behaved herself all right. I wish' Wes' would 've waited till the rush was over, that's all I got to say. Further, I don't hold with marryin' foreigners. It's an unlikely business. All the same, when Mareea come in for her money the day they was married, she cert'n'y did look fine and handsome—yes, sir—she looked as refined and neat as any lady in town, and don't you forget it."

The women who heard him didn't believe him, and the men were inclined to doubt. Had he proved without

question that Mareea was Venus de Milo, Calpurnia, and Joan of Arc in one, it would not have turned the neighbourhood in her favour. There was little but condemnation, from the pursed-mouth horror of the straitlaced elders to the sniggering vulgar jokes of the young blades who idled in Frank Shane's oyster bar. All were agreed that Wes' had done the biggest fool thing of the century. There were a few kindlier souls between these two groups who were genuinely sorry and troubled, but, even so, saw nothing but disaster in such a match.

Little additions and flourishes to the story began to go round. Belle Lucas had been taken with such hysterics that her mother had been obliged to send for Dr. George. Manie Nichols, very pale and saintly, made public mention of an erring brother's grievous transgression at Monday-night prayer meeting. Miss Becca Stewart told everybody she was going to hire a rig at the livery and call on the bride the minute she came home.

Pastor Cameron did not wait for this. He hitched the ministerial nag to the ministerial buggy and drove out to the Dean farm in a panic from the harsh criticisms his flock had heaped on him for not, somehow, delaying or frustrating the ceremony. He did not take his wife with him, although she wanted to go, and later he was glad he had refused her, for Allie Dean received him coldly and set at him with such rebukes and reproaches that the poor mild man who had intended to sympathize and console was driven to righteous anger and warned

her to judge not that she be not judged, following this with other scriptural injunctions as to tolerance and froward tongues and the proper training of children. At the end of the call he knelt to offer prayer, and Allie Dean sat straight in her chair with unbowed, defiant head, and when the prayer was over she said sharply that a man so unhandy in temporal matters, unable to keep the youth of his flock from committing a horrible mistake when it was right under his nose and quite within his power to do so, was not very likely to have much influence in the spiritual realm. In all his experience the Reverend Cameron had never met with such contumacy. He told this to his wife when he got home, and she had the joy of adding this tidbit to her feast of gossip. So Allie Dean's grudge against Mareea was increased and tongues wagged on with relish.

The lower element of the community was not content with tongue-wagging. As the subject of the marriage was bandied about nightly at Shane's, some half-muzzy loafer suggested that a shivaree was in order. A shivaree would take the Deans down a peg—they'd always been so high and mighty, so pious and hypocritical! Of course the Deans had been none of these things, but it served as an excuse. Shivaree were rare about Eden in these days, though a generation before no wedding with any taint on it could go by without one. If a girl married an old man for his money, if a father and brother with shotguns haled a reluctant bridegroom to the altar, if, as on one occasion, a well-to-do citizen married his housekeeper but a month after his wife's death—these

were the occasions for a shivaree, and there was just enough leeway in public opinion to let the nuisance go unpunished. But times had changed. The county was quiet, more genteel in its social motions, and the roisterers of twenty years ago were either dead or sublimated into respectable folk who didn't want to be reminded of the lawlessness of their youth.

Even so, down the back streets and alleys, in the slovenly little houses fringing the negro quarter, and out in the country off the main roads the talk began, and went on hidden, with covert chuckles, insistent as nature—"They say they're going to give Wes' Dean and his wife a shivaree!" . . . "Y'don't mean it—when?" . . . "Soon's they git back home—they've gone to Balt'mer. The second mate on the *Kent's* watchin' fer 'em and'll tip us off when they come back." . . . "Well, say, I'd like right well to see that—I wouldn't join in but I'd like to see it. Lemme know when you hear anything more, will y'?" . . . "Sure—why not?" . . . "You be sure and lemme know." . . . "You betcha."

Others, more cautious, refused. "No, sir, I'm not goin' to mix up in any shivaree on Wes' Dean. Ever gets out who done it the Meth'dists'd be after y' like a bunch o' hornets. Ol' man Nate Saulsbury's got a mortgage on my farm, an' he's kin to the Deans, too." . . . "Yeah, but it's nothin' but fun, they's nothin' to be scared of." . . . "All right, all right, you boys go along and raise your rookus, but leave me out. I know which side my bread's buttered." . . . "Aw, come on, don't be a spoilsport. Nobody's going to know you was along." . . .

"Yeah, nobody's goin' to know it—more likely the Sheriff's goin' to know it. You boys better walk light, I tell y'. I won't blab on y', but there's a plenty will."

These faint hearts were few. It had been a hot summer with plenty of work and no excitement, and the time was ripe for mischief. Old tin pans and antiquated wash boilers were retrieved and placed to be at hand when needed, squeaky "hoss fiddles" were improvised of cornstalks, willows along the causeway furnished material for ear-piercing whistles. The hardware store sold out its blank cartridges and firecrackers. It was going to be a first-rate shivaree.

Wesley and Mareea stayed in Baltimore four days, got off the boat at Easton Point in the early dawn, and drove the twenty miles home in less than three hours. It was not eight o'clock when they pulled up beside the side porch.

"I'm cert'n'y glad to get outa that smothering city," Wes' had repeated all the way home. He meant that he was thankful that he need never again see the slum tenement in which his wife had lived. The swarming street, the push-carts, the clatter of loud alien voices, the dirt, the smells, alarmed and dismayed him. He had never imagined human beings living so; it was worse than his pigsties. The dark, narrow stairs to Berta's room had seemed to him sinister; he held himself nervously ready for attack. He imagined that all the jabber was insulting, threatening. He resented the familiarity with which these tousled women and dirty, queer-looking

men spoke to Mareea, he resented the way in which they stared at him, he didn't want to shake hands with them. He kept urging Mareea to hurry and get her things, hurry, hurry, hurry! And he resolved that he would never breathe to his mother and sister one whisper of what he had seen and heard and smelt in Mareea's late home.

But Mareea had had a wonderful time. She'd married a rich man, she told them all, a man with a big house, with land and horses and cows, a boss with other men working for him! And look at her wedding ring, and look at her clothes, her hat, her shoes! Stylish! Swell! She bragged and she flaunted to her heart's fill, she told them all good-bye with great condescension, and once around the corner with Wes' carrying her battered, bulging satchel, she made a face and thumbed her nose at them all, mortifying and shaming Wes' to such an extent that she was instantly sorry for her gesture of scorn.

"Say, I didn't mean nothin', Wes', only I couldn't go with such people any more now I'm a lady."

"Ladies wouldn't ever do a thing like that," said Wes' heavily. "Promise me, Mareea, you won't ever do that again."

"But why not? Ev'ybody does it."

"No, they don't. And I don't like it." He saw a cloud lowering on Mareea's brow, and softened. "You're too pretty and too nice to—to make snoots and—and—do thataway with your fingers."

They had made many discoveries about each other in

these four days, and not the least of these to Wesley was that Mareea could sometimes be led but never, never driven. He found her a strange delight, she said and did things that made him laugh aloud with sharp, irresistible mirth and then wonder why he had laughed. She had a comic gaiety that was like a tickling finger on his ribs. At the boarding house where they stayed she did fairly well in manners and looked so pretty that everyone liked her. In her shopping she showed herself eager to save his money, not to spend it. He would have bought her a pocketful of trinkets, but she would not have them. Only a pair of red coral earrings she could not resist, but when he added a brooch to them, an oval brooch in fine worked gold with tiny hands in red coral clasped upon it, she was radiant over the gift, though she scolded him for the cost. He bought her a wine-red silk dress with a lace collar and a fringed pelisse which awed her with their magnificence.

"Godlemighty, I never thought to wear anything so fine," she said many times, patting the silk with ecstatic fingers.

Mareea found her young husband full of strange, stiff prejudices on unimportant matters—such as thumbing her nose and saying "Godlemighty"—but generous and kind and loving, this last more than she cared about, for so much kissing and embracing seemed to her tiresome and foolish. Still, she submitted and sometimes responded with a quick mounting passion which enchained him. But for the most part she had the cooler heart, the calmer feeling, though far less modesty. She

was a primitive animal, unaccustomed to any privacy, to any restraint in word or act, and her complete naturalness affected him with a fascinated horror which he could not make reasonable to her.

Mareea was as glad to come home as Wes'. The boarding house, at first strange and diverting, had begun to bore her, and though she was now sure that Wes' did not mean, had never meant to desert her, she was suspicious as to what his mother and sister might be up to if they were left alone too long. They might try to bar the house against her—Mareea had known of in-laws who did bad tricks. She was pleased and a trifle surprised to see that the doors were open and everything the same as she tugged her armful of packages into the house. It made her feel quite friendly toward the long-faced old woman and the weak girl who had been so mad about her marrying Wes'.

"Hello, hello," she called out. Lucy came to the door and Allie Dean appeared at the spring house. "Hello! How are you? how's the pussy cat? how's the dog?" went on Mareea affably. "We bought a lot of things."

Allie Dean looked at her son with bitter wistfulness—she had hoped that something, perhaps such a miracle as is due the righteous in a pinch, would happen to disgust and dishearten him with his marriage. If he had looked unhappy, bewildered, tired, cross, her heart would have gone out to him in tenderness. But instead he looked well, contented, jolly. The cup of sorrow was still at her reluctant lips.

Before his coming she had set a trap—now was the

time to spring it. "I've made no special arrangements for you," she said to him, "but I can give up my room if you want. It's the biggest upstairs."

Wesley fell in neatly. "Why, Mom, I wouldn't let you do that. We can keep to my room. It's plenty big enough. I'll take this plunder right up there."

Mareea made no objection. Wesley's room was larger than the one in which she and Berta had eaten, slept, and entertained. But Allie Dean had the sense of winning the first score. Her bedroom logically belonged to the master of the house and his wife. It was the largest, and the warmest in winter, coolest in summer, and though not so modern as the guest room which rejoiced in a new set of scrolled and varnished light oak, its furnishings were the best in the house. At one stroke Allie Dean had kept her shining mahogany chest and stand and tester bed from the desecrating paws of the interloper and had also retained a matriarchal advantage.

"Hey, Lucy, you come look at what I got," commanded Mareea. "I got a silk dress'll make your eyes bug out. An' new earrings, an' a fancy pin, solid gol'. I'm goin' to put it all on an' go over to the cannin' house to show Berta."

Allie Dean retired to the spring house. Mareea had not asked her to come, and though she longed to see and condemn whatever extravagance Wesley had been guilty of, she would not show it. She took the dasher of the churn and slapped it up and down, wishing futilely that she was striking Mareea with it. Anyway, she had

kept her room. "I'll soon let her know what's what," she told the churn.

Lucy admired the silk dress and helped Mareea shake out its folds and hang it up properly. She admired the jewellery, too, though she thought the earrings gaudy. She looked over the other purchases and found them fewer and more sensible than she had hoped.

"Here's the dress and hat you loaned to me," said Mareea. "I don't have to wear your things any more now I got my own. But I'm much oblige' to you. I been thinkin' about you an' I guess I'm goin' to like you, better'n your mother, anyway. She's a sour old devil, ain't she! Was she always in that way?"

Lucy panted with sudden helpless rage. "Don't you dare to talk Mother down. She's the best—the finest—you're not fit for her to wipe her shoes on!"

But Mareea would not quarrel. "Shut up, you make me tired," she said amiably. "I s'pose you wanta stand up for your mother, but you needn't get mad. Say, look at my new hat."

But Lucy had fled and Wesley was coming upstairs. "I'm going to put on my overhauls and get out," he said. "I bet every man on the place, 'cepting Tom Bowers, has been soldiering on me. Lookahere, Mareea, you've took up more'n your share of the closet. Hang your best dress in the clo'es room, can't you?"

"I don't know what it is."

"Over across the hall—look. All our best clo'es go in there."

Mareea investigated and found a small room with a

high window, the air thick with camphor and lavender. A row of hooks along the wall held sheeted garments. There were three trunks below and a row of bonnet boxes. Mareea's feminine vanity exulted in this display. "They sure are very rich," she thought. "A room to put clo'es in all off to themselfs!" She placed her red silk dress and pelisse with the others and insinuated her new hat into a bonnet box. "Wisht I'd've known about this to tell the people in Balt'mer—but they'd've said I was a liar." She came back to her husband. "What you goin' to do, Wes'? Where you goin'?"

"Out to work fast's I c'n get there."

"I'm comin' along."

"No, you can't do that. I've got to see the men. You stay round the house and help Mom."

Mareea made a naughty face. "She loves me like old Nick loves holy water. I'll come with you."

Wesley put his arms about her and stopped to explain. "Now, listen to me, honey. The ladies hereabouts don't never go out in the fields with their husbands—you understand? It's not a nice way to do. The hands would laugh, and the work wouldn't get done. Now, you be a good girl and wait for me till I come in for dinner." He kissed her and ran downstairs.

Mareea put on an old dress and went down also. Lucy, still flushed and angry, was at her detested task of the lamps. Allie Dean was busy at the stove. Neither of them spoke to Mareea.

"Got somethin' for me to do?" she asked genially. "Wes' wouldn't take me along with him."

"I reckon you'd rather be out of the house than in," said Allie Dean. "Want to pick some beans and tomatoes for dinner?"

"Sure, anything."

"There's a basket. It'll do for the beans. Don't pick any but what the pods feel good and full. And lay maybe a dozen real ripe tomatoes on top, when you're done. They'll be enough. You know where the garden is."

"Sure," agreed Mareea. She was surprised at her own pliability. But it was such a fine sunny day and she had so many grand clothes upstairs and this grand house belonged to her rich husband—what need to notice two disgruntled women! She took the basket and went out blithely, the collie leaping around her with joy, the cat walking behind her in aloof companionship.

"If she's willing to pick vegetables," said Allie Dean grimly to Lucy, "I'll keep her at it. Takes her out of our sight."

"She didn't make any fuss about the room?" Lucy was keen to know.

"Not a word. She better not."

"You going to let her pour the coffee at table?"

Allie Dean descended to a common phrase. "In the pig's eye," she replied.

"What if she wants to?"

"Then want can be her master."

"What if Bud says something—he mightn't like it."

"I'll take care of that. That girl's no more fit to rule a house like this——"

There was a long silence.

"Lucy," asked Allie Dean at last, "Bob Tracy's not been around since Bud got married. You didn't have a fuss with him about it, did you?"

"I've not seen him to have a fuss or otherwise. He never kept his engagement with me, and he never sent me any word. I suppose it's what I might expect—no nice fellow wants to go with a girl whose brother picks a wife out of the canning house."

"If he's that metal you're well rid of him."

Lucy was moved to unusual openness. "That's poor comfort, Mom. A girl likes to do the throwing over. Oh, if I could only understand why Bud did such a wicked thing! And he acts like he was real fond of her. Men have got no sense about women."

They worked on drearily.

Meanwhile Mareea, among the bean poles, surveyed her own state, laid her own plans. What a lucky, lucky girl she was to have caught such a husband. His sister would get married, his mother would die, and then she would be queen of everything here. For the present let them work for her, cook her meals, clean her lamps, wash and scrub. She, too, would work and she would make Wes' save his money, save and save and save until they had so much it would take a week to count it. Wes' was a good boy, he'd never get drunk and beat her. She should have gone to the priest while she was in the city, made confession, lit candles of gratitude to Saint Joseph, who surely must have been watching over her. Yes, and Saint Anthony, too. But there—the priest might have scolded her for not marrying a Catholic.

Best let the priest alone. Even for her church a poor girl like Mareea would not be expected to lose the chance of marrying a man like Wes'.

She looked about her, ownership in her mind. She would weed this garden, she would tend it. The sun was good. When she looked up through the bean vines the leaves seemed thin and yellow as the light came through them, the rough underside of the leaves caught against her dress, rubbed her bare arms. Tomorrow she would weed the onions—they were going to seed. The earth crumbled pleasantly beneath her feet, she crushed stray sprigs of white clover and peppergrass. It all smelled to her of wealth and plenty, and she felt deeply at home in it. Her body was warm like the sunlit air, strong and lusty as the growth about her, and she trod the brown earth as if she had sprung out of it with the stems and leaves. "If my poor father could see me he'd laugh like a fool," she sighed happily.

The day wore through without mischance. At dinner and supper Mareea and Wesley did not notice the pathetic aloofness of Lucy, the just-withheld scorn of Allie Dean, for he had so much to tell and she was so interested in it. During his absence the farm work had slacked, tomatoes had rotted in the field, a good-grade Jersey cow was sick. The field hands had been picking peaches and apples from the orchards. He grumbled at such an ill-run world.

"'Twouldn't've been so bad, but Tom Bowers had to be laid up with his stummick, along with everything

else. Man can't take his eyes off his hands a minute but they're up to something they oughtn't to be. I lost three wagonloads of tomatoes if I lost a basketful. Mom, I sh'd 've thought you and Lucy might've noticed what was going on. If that cow dies it'll cost fifty dollars to replace her."

"You run the farm and I run the house," said Allie Dean. "If you'd been at home this wouldn't never have happened." It was two-edged—a plain statement that she intended to be mistress of the house, and a thrust at his foolish marriage.

But Wes' missed the implication. "Come out on the porch, Mareea," he said, taking his pipe. She followed him, not without satisfaction that it was the others who must clear away the meal and wash the dishes.

She sat down close to him on the top step and took his hand. She had a hundred questions. What was a grade Jersey? . . . Why did cows cost so much? . . . Was the cow very sick? . . . What was in the field over past the garden? . . . Did he grow any wheat? . . . Any corn? . . . She was very ignorant, and it amused and pleased him to enlighten her. She stored away each answer he made in the back of her mind to be brought out and considered later. He looked at her fondly, contentedly. Mareea, in a nice clean dress like Lucy's and his mother's, was just as good as either of them, and a lot sweeter spoken. Her voice was a delight to his ears. She took more account of his say-so than they did, and that was agreeable. Now that he had married her, she had become part of himself, his life. She would soon take

over his ways and the ways of his people. He was conceited to think that he had the wit to find such a pearl in the muck-heap of the canning house!

"Well, I'm good and tired," he said at last, knocking out his pipe. "And I've got to be up mighty early. Let's go to bed. Hello—I guess Mom and Lucy have gone already. You go on in and I'll make the round of the barn and the stables and come right along."

"No, I go with you."

They went through the night, hand in hand, the darkness full of half-seen shapes and shadows of familiar things turned strange. Wesley locked the corn-crib and the stables and the chicken house and gave the keys to Mareea to carry, and she clinked them gently together in a little tune. The horses and mules stamped drowsily in their stalls, the cattle lay at peace in the fenced pound with the pointed turrets of straw and haystacks behind them, a rustic castle.

"People steal much stuff round here?" asked Mareea.

"Lands, no—but I always feel better to lock up. My father always did it and his father before him. And the key's 've hung on the same nail by the dining-room door ever since I can remember. I like to keep on with the old ways." It made him feel clever and wise to explain things to her.

As they went back to the house Mareea said: "Say, I think I hear somethin', kinda like music, away off. You hear it?"

Wesley listened, unsuspecting. "That's queer. We

couldn't hear band practice all the way from town. The wind's against it, anyway, to-night."

"It's nearer. It don't sound so much like music now—they's guns firin'—it's like a crowd—'lection night——"

An unconscious menace came to Wesley. "You go in. I'll just run down to the gate and see what's up."

But she followed on, a little behind him. He ran all the way down the lane, his pulses pounding premonition. He could hear them clearly now, tin beaten on tin, horse fiddles squeaking, whistles and horns and brassy taunting voices raised together. It could mean but one thing. "By God, it's a shivaree," he said aloud, "and they're coming here!"

The shame of it, the vileness! Made a laughing-stock, a dolly-mop of ridicule for the town, the county, the whole world. He went so hot with anger he seemed to be burned alive. Then he turned cold and drove himself to action.

He shut the wide-barred gate, dragging it out of the hedge where it had stood open and unused forever in his memory. It was rotten and shaky in his violent hands and so warped it made no real barrier. The gate posts had aged and stood no longer straight and in place but weakly aslant and askew. But at last there it was, the gate, set somehow against this rabble. It marked the boundary of his own domain from the open road, if nothing more. Let them put foot over that——

He ran back toward the house and saw Mareea. "What you doing here—go on in, I tell you!" he shouted. "Go on in and shut the doors."

"What you doin'? Whassa matter?" she demanded, at his heels.

"It's a shivaree—and I'm a-going to get my shotgun! A shivaree—a shivaree! I'll shivaree 'em——"

He leaped upon the porch, tore open the dining-room door, ran through and snatched his gun from its place in the front hall. There was a box of shells in the drawer of the hatrack and he got that out and ran on, unlocking the front door and leaving it wide behind him. The din was close now, ugly, raw, mean.

Lucy and Allie Dean came hurrying downstairs, the older woman with a lighted lamp, Lucy holding tightly to her mother. They called after Wes', but he was halfway to the gate and did not hear them. Mareea, rather pleasantly excited without the least idea of what it was all about, met them in the hall.

"What is it?" demanded Allie Dean. "What is it, for heaven's sake?"

"I don' know—a big noise comin' up the road an' Wes' got mad an' got his gun an' run off——"

Allie Dean's voice dropped to the tone of doom. "It's a shivaree!"

"Yeah—thass it," agreed Mareea. "Thass the very same word Wes' said."

Allie Dean set the lamp on the hall table and took a stout stick from the hatrack. She was dead white and her eyes burned fury. "I'm going down and help him," she declared. "That anybody'd dare——"

Mareea selected another stick. "If there's going to be fightin', I'll come, too."

"You stay in here," commanded Allie Dean. "You stay in here. You've done harm enough."

Mareea was left with Lucy trembling on the stairs. "But what they doin', Lucy? Whassa *matter?*"

Lucy made shrill barbed explanation. "When a man gets married in a low way the people come round at night and pretend to serenade him—but it's an insult, they mean it to insult him. They despise you, that's why they come and make all that awful noise——" she clapped her hands over her ears against the raucous riot, began to sob.

Mareea ran out after Allie Dean and Wesley. She flourished her stick as she ran and longed for a better weapon. An instant's recollection of a story told by her mother, Italian ragamuffins sniping the carriages of tourists with stones picked up in the streets—ah, there was a good idea. Groping in the dark, she collected into her skirt a number of the half-bricks with which Allie Dean edged her flower beds. Not until the dress stuff tore with their weight did she go on to join the force at the gate.

The shivaree troop was now very near, some thirty men and half-grown boys, most of them inflamed by generous swigs at Shane's before the start and kept at high pitch by pocket flasks of the same bad liquor. They had waited until twilight was well past to meet outside of town and had not begun their rough concert until they were a half mile or so from the Deans'. Then the bolder spirits declared it was time to tune up, and with the first rattle and clash of tin and pop of pistols

everyone was happier, more daring. Those whose breath was not busy with whistles and horns began to yell and sound catcalls and groans and rough shouts for Wesley to bring out his bride, adding various descriptions of Mareea and his reasons for marrying her. The cool sweet night with its soft air and high serene stars made the mêlée seem worse pollution, baser stain. Neighbours whose farms they passed heard the discord and came down to the road to see what was going on. Some of them followed at a little distance, but did not join the gang, nor interfere.

As they came to the gate the riot died down a little in an argument as to whether to go up to the house or stay in the road. "Head right on in, boys," shouted someone hoarsely. "Head right on in——"

Wesley Dean's voice cut through the night: "If any one o' you skunks sets foot on my land or touches his finger to my gate I'll blow him into hell." And with the last word he fired over their heads.

The banging and beating and whistling stopped abruptly, but a clamour of voices rose, confused, stupid.

"Hey—the gate's shut!"

"He's got a shotgun——"

"Less rush 'im—less rush 'im!"

"Less ride 'im on a rail!"

"Get 'im, get 'im!"

"Lemme at 'im!"

"Look out, that wa'n't no bird-shot!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!"

"Here you, Wes', don't go shootin' nobody——"

"I'll go first, come on——"

In the midst of this confusion Mareea ran up behind Wesley and threw her first half-brick with all her strength. It hit the arm of a cowardly lout who was carrying an old iron tray and a hammer, knocked the tray from his hand, and made him howl with pain and surprise. Other half-bricks came hurtling through the dark—no danger of a miss in a close mob of such size—and struck panic through the mass. Their whiskey courage fled, they dropped their pans and fiddles, their crackers and pistols, they began to mill about, and then to run, crying out with fright, ducking, scattering, nursing bruised heads, cut shoulders, torn hands.

"He's gotta big stone sling-shot," someone squealed.

"He's gotta gang of his men," yelled another.

"Look out, look out, he's got a gang o' men!" The word was taken up, they ran the faster, imagining themselves pursued by numbers, mistaking their own leaders for enemies, routed by their fears as much as by their injuries.

Allie Dean and Wesley stood amazed at the quick victory, mystified as to what had brought it about. Mareea, panting behind them, enlightened them: "I just wisht I had some more rocks—I'd follow 'em down the road. Shoot your gun at 'em again, Wes'—kill 'em dead!"

"What're you doing here? I told you to stay in the house," said Wesley.

"I wouldn't let you fight out here without me. Mother of God, didn' they run an' holler!" She laughed, wild

with excitement, not at all frightened. "Think they'll come back? I c'n get some more rocks——"

The reason of the rout slowly became clear to the others. "Was that what you was doing—throwing rocks? Where'd you get 'em?"

"Off the flower beds, all I could find in the dark. Pretty good, wasn't it?"

"Well, by jiminy!" said Wes', slowly comprehending. "You're the beateree! Mom, she run out here and rocked that crowd—that's what scared 'em off. I wouldn't 've believed it if I hadn't 'a' seen it."

But Allie Dean was not appeased by Mareea's bravery and resourcefulness. "If it hadn't been for her there'd be no need for us to be disgraced and shamed before the whole neighbourhood. A shivaree! On a Dean! Your father and grandfather'd turn in their graves to know it! That I sh'd 've lived to see such a thing!"

"You better go up to the house, Mom. It's all right now. I'll stay down and watch in case they come back —but I don't think it's likely. You go on—you're all upset. You go, too, Mareea."

"No," said Mareea, "I won't. I stay an' fight with you."

And to this she stuck. Allie Dean would not urge her. Drowned in angry mortification, she went alone to the house to join her tears and lamentations to Lucy's.

Mareea stood beside her husband, trying to see him in the dark, but he did not notice her. He was as angry, as outraged as his mother. Chaotic schemes of revenge filled his mind. He was sure he knew the voices of some

of the crowd, he remembered the vile things they had shouted, and he wished that he had shot and maimed and killed. How could he ever walk through the streets of Eden again! How could he bear the sniggering pity and the scorn of his friends and neighbours!

Mareea crept close to him, pressed herself against him, put her arms around his body and her head on his breast. "Lucy said they come because they despise me, Wes'. She said it was to insult you for marryin' me. Wes', I'm sorry, Wes'. She don' like me, your mother don' like me—an' now this! Maybe I better go back to Berta—I don' want to be a shame an' a sorrow to you." She felt very noble as she spoke, very noble, very piteous of poor little abused Mareea.

"No, by God!" It was not an oath, but a vow. He put his arm around her, held her roughly tight. "No—you and me's married and we'll stick together, no matter what happens."

She knew by his voice how much he was suffering, how much he was moved, and she was ashamed. And she had cost him this, it was through her that he suffered. Something moved in her careless light spirit, subdued it, reduced it, brought her above it. She did not know it, but she was taking the first step in a long strange way, the way to the possession of a soul.

"My Wes'," she said. "You are so good, so *good*. I love you, I do."

Chapter Ten

Allie Dean and Mareea were having a dispute, a dispute conducted with superior authority by the older woman, calm rebellion by the younger. It was a dispute that had smouldered for weeks, and at last had flared out openly.

"If you call me 'Ma-ri-i-a'," she drew the middle syllable long and thin, "I won't answer. It ain't my name."

"It certainly is your name. I don't propose to call you by any Italian name."

"You call me 'Mareea,' or I don' answer. You won' like that. But then, you don' like nothin'."

Mareea smiled. The outdoor work, the good food, the security had put a bloom and sheen on her beauty. She posed her hands on her hips and leaned against the door, aggravatingly pleased with herself.

Allie Dean stood, straight and tall, in the centre of the kitchen. The time since Wes's marriage had left hard marks upon her. It had cut away her slight spare flesh, chiselled her face into lines of forced endurance. She did not condone, she could not forgive, and the sight ever before her of Wes' and Mareea securely, gaily content was a sharp offence. The memory of the shivaree was a black mark against the girl, and the daily contact with

her, a sinner who should have been in penitent sackcloth but instead laughed and sang and enjoyed herself, worked a constant frenzy of resentment in Allie Dean's implacable soul. And she could make Mareea do nothing, nothing, accept none of the Dean ways unless she chose—and if she did choose Allie Dean felt it was only a mocking mimicry, assumed at whim. The firm sure plan she had made to alter and mould Mareea had bit by bit slipped hopelessly away. Even in this little matter of her name. . . .

"I got no time to stand jawin'," declared Mareea, when Allie Dean did not answer. "I got to rake up those leaves an' burn 'em. But you can jus' remember, Missis Din, there ain't nobody here name' 'Ma-ri-i-a'!"

She swaggered off to her self-appointed task. Anything she could do out-of-doors she loved, though now the wind was nipping cool and the sunlight pale. She had picked all of the dried beans and salvaged the bean poles for another year. She had brought in a store of green tomatoes before the frost could blacken them. Bonfires of dried leaves and weeds were her delight. She besought new tasks of Wesley and would have gone out to husk corn in the field and pick up potatoes if he had permitted. It was hard to find enough for her to do, but when she was idle she would call the dog and go to walk in the woods and come back with evergreen ferns, and trailing partridge berry, and put them amongst Allie Dean's tame geraniums and begonias in the bay window. They were no more welcome than Mareea.

She hated to stay in the house with Allie and Lucy,

though she would sometimes take a heavy task, a floor to scrub, or a big tub of clothes to wash, and go through with it well. She liked to feed the poultry, but she had an indifferent hand for butter- and cheese-making and as a cook she was hopeless. She could not set the table properly, she thought the daily meticulous sweeping and dusting and scouring a great waste of effort, and she made up beds with a careless swirl of the covers. Lucy's turning of mattresses, airing of sheets, shaking and alignment of pillows were to Mareea's mind irresistibly droll. Her sewing was primitive, and of hemstitching, eyelet embroidery, crewel work, and knitting—in all of which the two Dean women were exquisitely skilled —she knew nothing and would not try to learn.

"And Bud never says a word!" complained Lucy. "He don't care if she's a do-less, not a bit. Where'd he be and what'd this place look like if it wasn't for us, I'd like to know."

"Don't talk about it, Lucy. Seems to me as if he hadn't real good sense any more. If I believed in such things I'd think she put some kind of a spell on him, I really would."

They said things like this when they were sitting with their sewing and fancy work and heard Mareea outside, sometimes with Wes', talking eagerly, and holding to his arm; sometimes with the dog, throwing sticks and jumping with him; sometimes with the cat, petting and making up foolish dialogues with it.

"That tongue of hers is loose at both ends, hung in the middle," Allie Dean would say. Then they would

both sigh. They knew that she would presently come in, her cheeks blown red, her eyes dark and shining, her brimming life disturbing their quietness, their peace, turning it stale and colourless, making them seem more dead than living.

Lucy got on with her better than Allie, but that was because Lucy was softer, more willing to acquiesce, and also because she was happier. She and Bob Tracy had made it up. She knew now that he had stayed away at the time of Wes's marriage because of a quick attack of chills and fever, and not because he had turned from her. Later he had come to see her and they had decided to be married in the spring. That meant much sewing, for Lucy wanted a lavish setting-out. She meant to show her small world that though her brother had married in a queer unlikely fashion, she could keep up the best traditions of the family. In this her mother was her strong ally.

The aftermath of the shivaree had not been half so distressing as they had feared, but Allie Dean would not have admitted it. She was still raw with resentment, though Wes' and Lucy had largely stopped caring. The shivaree principals had been so roughly joked because of the way they had been put to flight that most of them denied participation. They had another cause for denial when the sheriff, directed by Squire Fiske and others of Eden's staid element, declared that he would arrest anyone known to be part of such an affront to public decency. Wesley Dean, going reluctantly to town for the first time after the shivaree, found himself by way of

being a hero. Pretty cute to have a bunch of men and a pile of stones ready and waiting for that lot of good-for-nothing rascals! Pretty cute, Wes', my boy! Served 'em right. This neighbourhood won't stand for any such carryings-on. Law and order and respect for decent citizens—that's the ticket! Pity he hadn't loaded up with bird-shot and peppered the whole lot—no more'n they deserved. But they s'posed he knew about Rich Prettyman's head—cut wide open, gash right down to his ear—and Barty Thomas's shoulder—swelled and stiff so he couldn't move it—and Cliff Waddell's banged-up hand! Must've been some right good marksmen behind that gate!

Wesley did not tell them that his wife had been the only stone-thrower. He accepted the praise in awkward silence, but the kindliness behind it soothed his pride, and the tally of injuries inflicted was more balm. He was willing to let the tale die, if other people were, and he did not drag Mareea's name into it.

Public opinion was veering toward Wesley, and even to Mareea. She did not go to town very often, but when she did she was not too unfavourably observed. With the end of the canning season old Berta and the other foreigners had gone back to Baltimore, so that spot of talk was clear. Mareea had a notion that it was galling to Allie Dean to see her well behaved and well received, and so she tuned her behaviour to a quiet key, said little, minded her own business. She could not help but know that her occasional appearances at church, in the wine-red silk and fringed pelisse, made a great sensation,

especially among the men. Some of the most strict and severe elders remarked to their wives and daughters over the Sunday dinner that Wes' Dean's wife seemed a well-favoured young woman and they didn't believe she was a bad one. And if the wives and daughters sniffed or said feelingly that fine feathers made fine birds, or that the match had pret' nigh killed Allie Dean and you had only to look at her to see what she'd been through. . . . Still, for the greater part, nothing more harsh was spoken.

The Dean household had many curious callers during the autumn. Some of them saw Mareea and some did not. She cared nothing for the stringent etiquette of bridal calls, and if she was enjoying herself out-of-doors she refused to be bothered.

Lucy would run out to her. "Mareea, we've got company, a couple of ladies from town. They're calling on you because you're a bride. You'll have to come in and talk to them."

"You can talk enough, you and your mother. Me, I'm busy. I can't leave my bonfire."

"Oh, yes, you can. It's not polite to stay out here."

"You tell 'em I'm not polite. I don't care."

"Oh, Mareea, please——"

Once in a while Mareea would succumb to this appeal. More often she would put on her sulky stormy look. "Go away—I won't bother with those old pigs. Leave me alone, can't you?" It was useless for Lucy to say more. She would be obliged to make such excuses as seemed most plausible. She and her mother were not

sure which was the greater pain—to make these excuses and have Mareea keep away, or to have her come in, glowing and hearty, her tongue ready to tick off all sorts of mischief.

The day that the Reverend Cameron ventured to call, the first time since his terrible visit just after the wedding, Mareea came in willingly, when Lucy told her that Mrs. Cameron was with him. She greeted the minister's wife with devastating words uttered in silky sweetness. "You don' look at me so mean as you did the day Wes' an' I got marry. My God, you were funny that day. We all laugh ourselves 'most to death when we think of it. Your eyes pop out in your face, you loo-ook at me—you loo-ook—neck all stretch'. Say, I wisht you'd 've seen yourself."

Poor Mrs. Cameron turned red with anguish, but she did not intend to be browbeaten by a foreign minx. "Anybody'd have looked at you that day in a dirty old dress and barefoot. You're all fixed up now," she replied tartly.

"Now, Elva—now, Sister Dean," interposed Mr. Cameron, "let bygones be bygones. No need to rake up the past. It has been very gratifying to me to see you at our morning Sabbath service, my dear sister. I hope you will come often. You are a church member, I dare say?"

Mareea rolled a wicked eye. "Sure I am!"

Mrs. Dean spoke up determinedly. "I think we'll leave it at that. In case Maria wants to join our church, Mr. Cameron, I'll let you know."

"I don't believe the priest would like it if I joined a Meth'dist church," said Mareea gently. "An' don't forget my name's 'Mareea.'"

Mrs. Cameron gasped. She'd found out something everyone in town would like to know. Mareea was a Papist! Mr. Cameron was horrified, but wary. "Well, well, as you say, Sister Dean, the matter will doubtless work out in time. We welcome all to our services in the spirit of Christian fellowship." Whereupon he fell to talking of the new Masonic hall, and when he could think of nothing more to say about that, rose and took himself and his wife home. He hated contention, and he was honestly sorry for Allie Dean and bore her no grudge for her former ill treatment of him.

Mareea, though, had her last word. She followed the pair out to their buggy, and as the Reverend untied the halter she bade good-bye to Mrs. Cameron. "Come again—if you need somethin' more to blab about."

When the scene was reported to Wesley he only laughed. "By jiminy, she heard the truth for once in her life."

"But nobody can go round talking like that, Bud," protested the outraged Lucy. "You ought to try to make her behave."

"Oh, leave her alone. She does all right when she's not pestered."

Allie Dean said nothing but the self-righteous stiffness of her mouth and chin told what she felt.

There was another caller with whom Mareea got along better. This was Belle Lucas, who had at length

come out of her hysterical disappointment over Wes's marriage and found herself gnawed by curiosity as to his wife. Glimpses of Mareea at church and in town increased her desire and at last she decided on a visit. She asked Manie Nichols to come with her, and though Manie at first demurred—"We oughtn't to indulge our idle curiosity," she said—she didn't demur sufficiently to refuse.

"I want to look at her close to, and I know you do," said downright Belle. "People tell such yarns about her, and yet when I've seen her she looks fascinating. I wish Mother'd countenance my wearing big earrings! It's appropriate, too, Manie—you and me, the two who was jilted, calling on the girl who really got him. You ought to want to go. It shows Christian charity and broad-mindedness."

But it proved to be a day when Mareea refused to come into the parlour. She was cleaning the chicken house.

"I'm sorry my sister-in-law's too busy to see you. She started a piece of work and is right in the middle of it," said Lucy faintly.

"Now look here, Lucy, we know she don't care for callers, but I'm bound, bent, and determined to get acquainted with her. Where is she? I'm going to talk to her if she slaps me in the face."

"Very likely she will," said Allie Dean.

"I've been slapped a many a time when I was a little tike, so I reckon one more won't bother me," said Belle. She was not afraid of Mrs. Dean now. But Manie made

apologetic noises and gestures, asking pardon for being in company with such bad manners.

"You'll find her," replied Allie Dean, "scraping out the chicken house with a hoe and putting kerosene on the roosts. Go right along if you think you'll enjoy it."

Belle marched out. "I had no idea she was going to act so awful," quavered Manie. "I ask you to believe I hadn't the least idea. I'm really mortified, Mrs. Dean —to have her speak to you so after all you've been through."

"I've been through so much worse than anything Belle can do, it don't matter," said Allie Dean. "You needn't imagine I'd blame you for her behaviour, Manie. You've always been a good gentle girl, and you know what my hopes were—that you'd be in the place Maria is. I'd've welcomed you and you know it."

While this conversation went on Belle had found Mareea. "Hello," she began, "d'you like to clean chicken houses?"

Mareea looked around crossly. "Say, are you the visitor? What made you come out here to bother me?"

"You wouldn't come in."

"I look like sittin' in the best fine rooms talkin' polite, don't I?"

Belle found herself liking Mareea. "Can't you stop a minute? Wes' don't pay you wages for this heavy work, does he?"

"Thass pretty good—Wes' pay me wages! Whass your name, you funny?"

"Belle Lucas is my name."

"Belle—*bella*—that means beautiful. And you're real good-lookin', too."

"I wish I was as good-looking as you."

"You think I'm good-lookin'?"

"I think you're *lovely*."

Mareea could not resist this. She laid aside her hoe. "I don' mind goin' in with you."

"I'd rather stay outdoors. Mrs. Dean don't like me much."

"She don't like me much, neither. She's hard to get along with."

"I couldn't get along with her. She's too pious. You didn't know it—I wanted to marry Wes'." There it was out, the thing she had longed to say.

Mareea looked at her agreeably. "Well, you didn't get 'im."

Belle could not check her stark frankness. "He didn't want me," she confessed. "I thought a lot of him. I cried like a river when I heard he'd got married."

"You were a big fool. I wouldn't let no man make me cry like a river."

"That's easy to say—but I don't believe you would."

"I had plenty fellows up to Balt'mer. I could've marry ten times a year if I'd wanted. But none of 'em had a farm."

"My soul! You didn't marry Wes' because he had a farm, did you?"

Mareea gave her nonchalant shrug. "What you want him for? He's got two hands, two eyes, two legs, like all the rest of men. But a good big land——" her eyes

glowed. "Mother of Jesus, ain't you crazy about things growin' an' livin', trees an' ev'ything? Say, I am! I like the dirt an' stuff growin' out of it."

"Wes' Dean is a grand fellow and I'd've had him if he wanted me, even if he hadn't an acre of ground or two cents to rub together."

"I expec'," said Mareea, "you was too easy."

There was a full stop. Then Belle sighed. "I expect I was," she agreed. "Well, I'm going along back to the house before Mrs. Dean and Lucy and Manie pass out with shock and curiosity. Come see me sometime when you're in town. You and I could get along first-rate. We could be real friendly."

"Thass nice. I ain't got no friends here, excep' Wes'. You come again—I won't stick out in the chicken house. I'll come in an' we'll sit down like ladies—like Missis Din an' Lucy." She grinned, offered a dirty hand.

All the way home Belle was silent and patient under Manie's complaints and rebukes.

"What on earth did you find to talk about, you two?" asked Manie, at last coming to what she wanted to know.

"We talked about the farm and Wes' and other matters. I like her first-rate. I can see how she got him and neither of us did."

"Belle, you do say the most terrible things. Well, why was it?"

"She's better looking, for one thing. And she's got a lot more sense."

This was too much for Manie. "She may have more

sense than you have. She must have if you're going to talk and act like a plain idiot, but I don't care for any such slur on my intelligence, if you please."

Belle laughed aloud at this and would not argue.

Allie Dean and her daughter also exchanged views on the strange visit. "Belle Lucas takes a great deal on herself to run out to people's barns and stables, in my opinion. Nothing but prying—she must stick her nose into everything. I never liked her—I'm glad Wes' didn't marry her."

"She and Mareea seemed to get along real good, Mother. Isn't that strange?"

"Not so strange. They've got one quality in common."

"What's that?"

"Brass," said Allie Dean, and drew her lips tightly again. Oh, she was so tired, so harrowed by this altered existence, this existence without dignity, without peace. If only Wesley had been unhappy, disappointed, at odds with his wife, she could have endured it, for that would have vindicated her relentless disapproval and would have given her a solid family once more, barred against Mareea. But he was marvellously happy. He threw out little trying remarks, wishful to win his mother's favour. "Mareea's got a real head on her for farming, darned if she hasn't." And "She looks so odd and pretty the way she combs her hair." And "She'll do anything for you if you gentle her." Gentle her! Allie Dean stoop to cajole and pet and wheedle that—that piece of trash! Never in this world. She must rule in her own way, her word must

be accepted in her household. Tolerance, policy, compromise—none of these could ever enter into her scheme of life. She must dominate, or destroy.

"Never mind, Mother," said Lucy. "Soon's I'm married you're to stay with me."

Allie Dean shook her head. "A young married couple must live to theirselves, at first anyway."

"But Wes' and Mareea haven't," said Lucy tactlessly, "and they seem to get along."

"We only stayed because she's so clumsy and dumb she'd ruin everything if she was left to herself. And Wesley'd never eat a decent meal. She can only break and muss and tear and burn. It was our duty to stay, as it'll be my duty after you're married. We don't need to consider their feelings. They didn't consider ours."

She never missed a fling at Mareea. It was bewildering to find people in the world who didn't take her point of view. Uncle Nate Saulsbury had come over to look at his kinsman's wife and his comments were a plague to Allie.

"Cert'n'y am glad Wes' had spunk enough to make his own choice," cackled the old man. "He's been tied to your apern strings a mighty long while, Allie. I never b'lieved he'd cut loose, but I see I didn't give him his due. This wench'll bring new blood int' the fam'ly, and about time. Look at her alongside Lucy here—Lucy so white and pindlin' and Mareea like a big thousand-leaf rose bloom, full o' peth and sap and bright colours."

"Lucy's been puny ever sence she was a baby," said Allie Dean.

"Well, I bet you a levy Mareea ain't. She ain't the puny kind. If so be I'd 'a' laid eyes on her first I might've been tempted to give Nathan Junior and Ed a step-ma. Warms up my old bones whenever she turns them big snapping eyes on me."

"I wisht you had seen her first. She'd've kept you in line."

Even though she answered him with spirit she was wounded and depressed by his lack of sympathy for her. "Men are all alike over a woman of Maria's stripe," she said to Lucy. "Uncle Nate talks right down disgusting, and Nate Junior and Ed carried on ridiculous about her—it didn't set well on their wives, neither. And Randall Covey's another tom-fool. Every man connection in the whole family thinks she's fine. Can you imagine!"

Lucy had a special grievance. "And Bob, too—he can't see why I don't like her. She tickles him half to death with the things she says—he even thinks the way she swears is funny. We had words about it. I told him if he liked it so much I'd try talking that way myself."

"That made him sing a different tune."

"Yes, it did, but it didn't make him see that Mareea oughtn't to do it."

"Why don't you call her 'Maria'? I hate hearing that heathen name."

"I forgot. And she's so set against it."

"That's no reason. Right's right, and if we keep firm maybe she'll come to understand it." She did not tell Lucy what was working in her mind. As soon as the

wedding was over, she meant to make a superhuman effort to discipline and subdue Mareea. While Lucy was there, and there was the important business of the setting-out on hand, it was not easy to fasten her will on this one object. Later, when she'd have more time, and would be more often alone with the girl, and Wes' would be a little over his infatuation. . . . She thought of ways and means, expedients, subterfuges.

"We'll see if she doesn't answer to 'Maria,' once I've really started on her," she told herself, savouring a final triumph.

Chapter Eleven

WES' DEAN paid scant heed to the ill feeling that divided his mother from his wife. He was out of the house all day. When he was indoors and his mother was difficult, he turned aside from it, passed it by, and promptly forgot it, so much had her influence over him waned. Mareea knew that Allie Dean was only biding her time, alert for every slip and deviation, never failing to bring each one to her son's attention. Mareea knew and did not pass it by, nor forget it. The breach between the two women grew ever wider.

Mareea did not, for her part, plot and scheme against the other woman. Sometimes she was driven to sudden violent explosion and vituperation, and at such moments Allie Dean took prudent cover. She counted these scenes to her advantage, knowing how much Wes's easy-going temper disliked them, and when she remained meek and persecuted, appealed to him for protection against Mareea's rage and put the girl in the wrong, she felt she had sowed a seed of doubt between the two. Perhaps this seed would die, but perhaps also it might root and grow and increase, as she hoped.

All that she did against Mareea, Allie Dean told herself, she did as a Christian mother concerned for the welfare of a beloved son. Beneath her self-righteousness,

her dark instinct for spoliation and revenge waited and flourished. Her prayers went up nightly to that Jehovah who "hath a controversy with Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways," the Lord who thundered at the wicked: "I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentations." For it was Mareea's irrepressible gaiety, her laughter, and Wes's light response to them that Allie Dean found worst to bear.

"Been a good thing," Mareea thought sometimes, seeing Allie Dean's eyes severely following her, "if I'd 've pushed the sour ol' devil right out at the first, when I had the chance. I can't do it now, not till after Lucy gets marry. Maybe after that——"

She complained, not very seriously, to Wes': "Whassa matter with your mom that she act so mean to me allatime? I don' do nothin' to her."

"She's all upset about Lucy getting married and leaving," said Wes'. "Lucy's her pet, you know. She kinda takes her marrying hard."

Mareea looked at him searchingly. Yes, he actually believed what he was saying. He wasn't trying to deceive her and smooth her over. "You cert'n'y are a nice boy, Wes'," she said fondly.

"You're right for once," said Wes'.

They were in the granary, where the wheat lay in a great gold mountain, penned in behind stout boards, but ever escaping in tiny spurting runnels so that to walk on the foot space left was a crunching, unsteady business. Mareea sat on a pile of sacks at the granary door, and Wes' had his shovel in hand. He was ready

to bag the wheat, and Marea had come with him, as she did everywhere he would permit.

"I could help you if you'd give me another spade," she said. "I bet I could put wheat in sacks fastern' you can."

"This ain't a spade, this is a shovel."

"Why ain't it a spade? I bet it is a spade, too."

"Now lookahere, Mareea, a shovel is bigger'n a spade, and bends up on the sides to hold more. A spade's straight, for digging. You see?"

"Aw ri', smarty—I don' care what you call 'em."

Wes' came over to her and put his hand under her chin, tipped up her face. She was so delicious to him, so marvellous a possession. He could never have enough of being close to her, touching her firm sweet flesh, her thick hair, looking at the wonder of red blood beneath fine skin, of eyelashes that curled starlike, of eyes so dark that pupil and iris seemed one, of lips so scarlet they seemed painted. "My, but you're pretty," he said, standing tranced. Then he shook himself. "I won't get a bit of work done if you hang around here. I don't do nothing but look at you."

"If you'd only let me help——"

"You could be a real help if you'd get offa the sacks and look 'em over. Lay the ones with holes to themselves, and the good ones hand in to me."

"I'll do that."

Now they both began to work. "What you goin' to do with these bad sacks—throw 'em away?"

"No, Mom'll mend 'em, and I'll use 'em the last."

"I'll mend 'em. I c'n sew good enough as that, though your momma does say she wouldn't trust me to hem a dishrag."

"Mom didn't mean it."

"Then she needn't 've said it."

The logic of this struck Wesley. "But you ain't much of a hand at sewing, you know, Mareea. That one shirt you mended f'r me looked 's if lightning 'd struck it."

They both shouted with laughter. Then Mareea turned grave. "You think I ain't good f'r much, Wes', like your momma does, I guess."

"You're awful good f'r me, honey."

"Am I—is that the God's truth?"

"What's the matter with you, girl? Now you listen —you just suit me right down to the ground. I wouldn't trade you off for all the rest of the women in the world. And I don't care if you never sew a stitch, or cook a meal, or do anything, so long's you stay with me. And as f'r not knowing things, you got more sense about the farm this minute than Lucy or Mom either, even if they have lived here all their lives. How's that—satisfactory? Jiminy," he marvelled aloud, "it's a queer thing how easy it comes to me to say things like that to you!"

Mareea nodded. "Thass aw ri'. I guess I get a thread and needle now, to sew these sacks."

"They're up to the house. Mom and Lucy'll show you."

It was Lucy she asked, but Allie Dean answered. "You going to mend the sacks—well, they'll look like a

hurrah's nest. Wes' better bring 'em up here to the house and let me do it."

"No, I'm goin' to," said Mareea. "Where's the thread? Where's the needles?"

"Well, I suppose I can do 'em over, behind you." She grudgingly brought out the desired supplies.

The tone and the unwilling gesture roused Mareea's wrath. She snatched the box from her hand. "You so rotten mean," she said, "you jus' like a rotten ol' apple. My Godlemighty, you better watch out. Some day I'll get real mad an' give you a good bang in the face. Now run an' tell Wes' I said it, an' see if you can't raise another fuss, you ol' tattle-tale!"

"*Mother!*" cried Lucy, as Mareea went out, "are you going to stand that? You'd ought to tell Bud, right this minute!"

But Allie Dean saw that she had gone too far. She put on a look of resignation.

"I'd stand more'n that before I'd let her turn Wes' against me, and that's what she's working for. She's got such a hold on him now that she might do it. I don't want to make the Deans an open scandal, and—and—I'm not going to leave this house until the proper time, and I'm good and ready." The spot of angry purple-red in her cheeks belied her meek tone, but Lucy did not know that.

"Mother, you're a saint on earth!" she exclaimed. "I never heard of such boldness, and such ugliness—she's downright terrible!"

"Pray for her, Lucy, I do."

"Well, she don't deserve it."

Meanwhile Mareea had stalked back to the barn in a rage, but on the way she began to smile, thinking of how her mother-in-law had looked. "I only need to holler a little," she said to herself. "It scares her. She wouldn't really fight."

But the encounter had excited her, and though she sat down and mended a few sacks while Wes' shovelled, she could not keep still very long. She began to sing, first low, and then louder. Then she flung the sacks aside and jumped out on the barn floor. "Look here, Wes'," she called. "Stop workin' a little, can't you? Look, here's a dance Berta taught me—she useta dance it when she was a girl, an' she can dance good yet, for all she's an ol' woman, older as your mom."

Wes' stopped unwillingly. "I never danced a step in my life!"

"Time for you to begin, then. Now——"

She took up the tune again, and clapped her hands to accent the rhythm, stepped lightly back and forth, whirled and swayed. "Look—you try it. It's a dance for two, a fella and a girl. Stand over there an' step toward me—one foot straight after another. . . . There, that's it, snap you' fingers—loud! Now stamp you' heels, hard—so! Now back—now spin round—now come up to me again—take my hand—I turn under. So—now you —hey, you doin' fine!" She had drawn him in against his awkward, unaccustomed will. "Now—over again——" She sang the words, strange words, words Wes' could not understand, but they made part of the magic. He

danced easily back and forth, his strong and supple body obedient to Mareea's beckonings. He enjoyed it. His mother had always called dancing one of the devil's snares, but there was nothing evil about this—it was like a child's game, "London Bridge" or "Drop the Handkerchief." And Mareea dancing around him, to him and away, laughing, singing, stamping her little heels so comically on the bare barn floor, whirling about with such a whisk of petticoats—why Mareea was, all over again, delicious and delightful. He began to leap higher, to put in prancings of his own. He caught the tune and sang it with her. He never once thought that he was a church member and imperilling his immortal soul. The dust flew round him, his blue eyes danced as lightly as Mareea's little feet.

Tom Bowers had come up from the field to mend a broken trace. He heard the duet, the stamping, stepping footfalls, and paused amazed, wondering. He approached the barn door cautiously, and applied his eye to a crack. He saw what his astonished eyes had never beheld before, and might never behold again, a Bohemian peasant dance danced on the unresisting floor of a good Methodist barn. Tom Bowers had been foreman of the Dean fields for many years, before Wes's father had died, he was a staid and serious, though unlettered man, and he was fond of Wes' as a slow-going, unenterprising uncle or elder brother might be fond of a quick and lively boy. He had disliked the marriage, and had no truck, as he said, with Mareea, resenting her appearances in the fields at Wes's heels, her ready tongue, her dark,

bright, changing face. She was different from Tom Bowers's wife and from all the women round about, and that was enough to condemn her. There is no conservative or fundamentalist equal to an honest, uneducated farmer.

But now—"I'll be dummed!" he whispered. "I'll be everlastingly gol-dummed!" He could not pull himself away. He was fascinated, captured. He did not hear Allie Dean coming up behind him, and when he did he started like a man who is guilty of a crime. He respected and admired Allie Dean, and to a certain extent was in her confidence. He knew that she had suffered from Wes's marriage, and his sympathy was entirely with her, though he had no conception of how far her suffering had served to cloud and poison her spirit.

"What you looking at?" she asked, and something in his demeanour made her lower her voice to a whisper. Now she could hear the singing. She took Tom's place, and he went off precipitately to the repair shed, without answering her question, without looking at her.

Allie Dean had come out because, like Mareea, the quarrel had excited her and the defeat was unbearable. Saying nothing to Lucy, she had started to the barn determined to have it out with Wes' and his wicked, low wife. She was sure Mareea would be telling Wes' her own side of the story, so she persuaded herself that he must also, and at once, hear his mother's side. Fury keyed her courage high. She had left caution behind. Even though there was so little time before Lucy's wedding, and though she had meant above all things to keep

peace—her sort of peace—until that event was over, the affront Mareea had put on her was too much to endure. To dare to threaten, to offer to strike! However far gone in his infatuation Wesley might be, he would not countenance this!

She had expected to find them talking together, with herself as subject. She had supposed that the scene was as important, as disrupting to Mareea as it had been to herself. And she saw them singing, laughing, dancing—*dancing*—like a pair of wantons, as if there wasn't a serious thought between them! Mareea—jigging like a jumping-jack on a string, showing her legs to her knees—to her *knees!* And Wes'—Wes', her own son, brought up in certainty that light feet lead only to perdition—Wes' capering about like a—like—— She had no comparison.

And even as she looked the dance stopped and the dancers flung themselves into each other's arms, a caress spontaneous, naïve, tender, supremely forgetful. Allie Dean had never seen or known such love. It seemed to her utterly abandoned, shameless, vile. She drew away from the peep-hole, her errand forgotten. She almost ran back to the house, racked now with a different sort of anger, outrage, that two human beings should be so happy. She turned into the spring house to calm and collect herself and stood there in the semi-darkness with her hands over her burning face. What she had seen had changed her. Before this there had always been a little bit of her that recognized Mareea's honesty, her willingness to work, her open frankness, even her affection for

Wes' as qualities that might in time redeem her. But now Allie Dean counted none of these. No human being, in her code, had any right to rapture and to joy. It was sin, offensive and stinking sin.

Tom Bowers saw her go, as he came from the repair shed with the trace strap in his hands, saw her panic haste and wondered at her leniency. "Mis' Dean must be losin' her grip to let dancin' go on and not put a stop to it," he thought. "It's hard on her, it's cert'n'y hard on her havin' Wes' act so. And yet," his mind went back to the dancing, playful pair, "and yet—by gollies—there was somethin' awful takin' about 'em. That girl—well, if I was a young fellow myself, I'd—I'd maybe be as big a fool over her as Wes' is. She's—she's real appetizin'. An' Wes'—I wouldn't a drempt he had it in him to skip so light! I bet Mis' Dean's mad as a hornet. She'll give them young folks a lambastin' they won't forget."

He chuckled and went his way. He swerved unconsciously from his allegiance to Allie Dean and was now on the side of Mareea. But he did not know how mad Allie Dean was, and he was wrong when he thought she would tongue-lash her son and his wife. She said not one word to them, nor to Lucy, of what she had seen. But within herself there was born an unrelenting purpose, not to discipline Mareea and bend her to her will, but to cast her out, blacken her, destroy her forever. Nothing, nothing would ever satisfy Allie Dean but a Mareea beaten, stripped, and abased, with not one thing left for comfort or for ease.

Chapter Twelve

It was a cold winter afternoon, Sunday. Dinner had been eaten, a rich, too-heavy meal—roast stuffed chicken, oyster pie, potatoes, dried corn and beans, canned fruit, raisin pudding, cake, and coffee with plenty of thick cream. Wesley had built up the fires and sat before the dining-room hearth in drowsy repletion. Mrs. Dean and Lucy were at the eternal clearing up. They talked together in voices pitched to exclude Mareea and Wesley. Mareea was restless, fidgeted from one chair to another, yawned, looked out of the window, hummed a most un-Sabbath-like tune at intervals, tapped an impatient foot. Everything was apparently peaceful, but in reality the three women were ready and alert for conflict.

Lucy and Allie came in from their last errand to the kitchen with a show of rolling down sleeves and buttoning cuffs and taking off aprons in preparation for idleness and rest. Usually Lucy played hymns on the parlour organ and Allie Dean read her Bible and the Sunday-school leaflets. But to-day before they could get started at these suitable occupations Mareea attacked.

"What I want to know is how many more our chairs an' tables does Lucy mean to carry off?" she asked

squarely. "Bob Tracy has no furnicher, I guess. He is too poor to find things for his house? So we must be strip bare—heh?"

The other two women stiffened and waited. Mareea sat down on a chair against the wall, crossed her arms, and looked at Wes'. He roused himself bewilderedly, annoyed at having his pleasant somnolence disturbed.

"What you talking about?" he asked. "Who says Lucy's going to take the furniture?"

Allie Dean took up the gauntlet. "I don't believe you're the one to grudge your sister a proper setting-out, are you, Wesley?" She ignored Mareea.

Wes' began to wake up. "Me grudge Lucy a setting-out, Mom! Haven't I been giving her money to buy her plenty clo'es and house linen and a set of china? I want her to have things right and proper, you know I do."

"I'm not a-talkin' about her clo'es, nor the set of china, nor the sheets an' pilla cases," put in Mareea. "I'm a-talkin' about the furnicher. Your mother says she's to take the shiny table an' the bookcase in the parlour an' the best chairs an' the lamp with glass dangles. An' the high clock in the hall. An' this here table we eat off of. An' a lot more upstairs. This house'll look like a picked bird when they get done. You thought I didn' hear you, Missis Din, but I was standin' right outside the door all the time."

"Eavesdropping comes natural to you, no doubt," said Allie Dean, "but you'd ought to be ashamed to own up to it."

"You ain't said nothin' about the furnicher. Does

Lucy take it away or not, Wes'? Is these things yours, or whose? Did you promise 'em to Lucy?"

Wesley scratched his head and frowned. Before he could speak his mother forestalled him. "Most of what I give to Lucy I brought here as a bride. I want her to have 'em—she knows how to take care of good furniture. I'm not going to leave 'em here to be marred and scarred and broken by them who's used to nothing but sticks."

"What about that clock? You said that was your great-grand-pop's clock, Wes'." This was Mareea.

"Well, it was. Why, Mom—did you say Lucy could take the clock? Of course, anything that was yours you've got a perfect right to give her, and so far's I'm concerned she's welcome——"

"That tall chiny chest on high legs—that was your great-grand-pop's, too, you said."

"I won't touch a single thing," broke in Lucy. "I won't have any of the stuff. I reckon Bob and me can manage without anything from this house."

"You're going to have my things, every one of 'em," declared Allie Dean.

"Aw ri'," said Mareea, "but you got to say which is your things and which ain't."

"You ought to be ashamed, Wesley Dean, to let your mother be talked to so."

"First I should be ashame', an' then you, Wes'. What we got to be ashame' for? We don't want our furnicher stole away——"

"'Stole'—I like that! Your own mother's a thief!"

But Wesley was roused. "Lay off Mareea, can't you.

Mom? She only talks like that. But fair's fair. You know —though I'd never 've brought it up—that Father left me the farm and the house and what was in it and told me to take care of you both. You got the rented piece down the road as your thirds. But I wanted Lucy to have some prop'ty of her own and I've put nearabout three hundred dollars in the bank in her name, every year, even when it cramped me close to do it. She's got nigh to four thousand in her own right, this minute, and that's a lot of money. I don't see what call she's got to take the furniture that was left to me. Give her your things if you want to, but that's enough."

"You forget your great-grandpa was Lucy's great-grandpa, too. Why shouldn't she have half this furniture? She's got real family feeling, Lucy has."

"S'far's that's concerned, you're my mother, same as Lucy's. Why shouldn't you give me half your furniture? Not that I'd claim it, but that's a fair question."

"A fair question deserves a fair answer, Wesley. You know well enough why I want Lucy to have my things."

"She means me," said Mareea. "She'd like to get all away from me an' you, but I was too smart for her."

"Oh, my land!" exclaimed the badgered Wesley. "You women do let your tongues run away with you. Now, once and for all, I'll settle this. You give Lucy what you want to that's your own, Mom, but she gets none of mine. I've saved her a big sum of money, I've handed over liberal for her housekeeping stuff and dresses, but that's all I'm going to do. Understand me,

that's my last word." He got up and put on his overcoat and hat. "I'm going outside and cool off—and I don't want to hear another word outa anybody."

Mareea snatched up a shawl to run after him, but paused to offer warning. "If you'd treat me aw ri', I'd treat you aw ri'. It's no *use* to be so mean."

The northwest wind whipped her skirts about her, tore at her shawl, the rough cold air cleared away her spite, blew the anger from her face. "You, Wes', wait for me!" she called, and as he paused she ran past him, seized his arm and dragged him along in a wild race. Then he jerked away from her and ran, faster than she could, laughing at her while she pursued him, and the dog leaped about them and barked for joy at the game.

"Less go down in the woods, less walk in the woods," panted Mareea. "I'm sick an' tire' of being coop up in the house. Say, don' run so fast, I can't ketch you."

He pretended to wait for her, then as she reached for him, dodged and ran again. They played this, laughing and shouting like two children, she chasing him while he ducked and whirled and made believe to be afraid of her, until they were both warm and red and out of breath.

"Stop, I got a stitch in my side," ordered Mareea. "Stop, you bad ol' boy!"

They walked together down the farm lane across fields, he leaping the fences and she scraping through them, until they came to the woods. Their talk was all of the farm. One of the cows was to calve soon, the first of the herd. This field must be limed next year, the one beyond should have an underdrain. But when they

reached the deep woods they were silent. The wind sang high in the pine tops, but down below its force was gone. The brook on its way to the river sang also, for there had been much rain and it was high and swift. On the log bridge they stopped and leaned to look, drawn by the spell of running water, dappled and barred by sun.

"Belle was smilin' at you in church to-day," said Mareea. "I bet she still wants you."

"She's not likely to get me."

"I'd tear her eyes out. No, I wouldn't—I like Belle."

"I like her, too."

"Not s'much as me?"

He put his arm about her. "What d'you think?"

"Say, I like it when we're off together. Then everything's fine. In the house it's all mean."

"You know you oughtn't 've raised that fuss with Mom. Why didn't you tell me what she was up to and let me talk to her quiet by ourselves. Now she and Lucy'll go round like somebody was dead. I hate a fuss."

"I don't. I like 'em."

"Yeah, you little scratch-cat, I know you do. But you'd oughta be more careful."

"She hates me—she'd like to poison me."

"Aw, Mareea—that's an awful way to talk."

"But it's true. Only I don' care. I ain't afraid of her. An' she ain't got the right to our things, Wes'. An' look-ahere—you're not to give Lucy any more money."

"I should say not, once she's married. I've done the square thing by Lucy. Many a brother'd not have given her a red cent outside her board and clothes."

"No, but you're good, Wes'. Only too easy, too soft."

"Well, we got plenty—and I do hate a stingy man."

"We got to save for our children."

"Yeah—we got a very large fam'ly." He pinched her ear jocosely.

"We're goin' to make a start before long."

"Say, Marea, you don't mean——?"

She nodded. "Sure—in the summer. An' it's goin' to be a boy, too. We got enough women in the Din fam'ly."

"By jiminy!" Wesley leaped high and clapped his heels together three times before he came to earth. He seized Mareea and spun her round, kissed her, tousled her hair. "By jiminy crickets! You an' me an' a boy!"

She kissed him, laughing at him. "You ol' funny! Now you see why we got to save our money an' keep our chairs an' things. That boy'll want chairs to set on, an' a table for his dinner. Yes, an' he'll always have a good dinner, too, plenty to eat. Thank the Holy Virgin he won' never hafta go to sleep with his little belly pinched up an' achin' him because he's got no dinner."

"Why, Mareea, honey—you never——"

"My Godlemighty, I just wisht I had a dollar f'r every day I had no dinner when I was a kid. Berta, she'd get outa work, an' maybe the Charity Sisters'd slip us a little somethin', but it wasn't never enough. No fire, hafta stay in bed to keep warm, nothin' to eat but maybe a little bread——"

"But that's awful! I never drempt—Mareea, girl—

that's awful! Even the darkies around here never go hungry." He held her close to him, so shocked that he forgot for a moment his coming child. He was accustomed to plenty, to living generously from the yield of his acres, flour and meal and milk, meat, potatoes, fruit —more than could be used even in years of lean harvest —and the vision of starvation, of actual hunger touching one of his own appalled him as a wanton cruelty. Now he understood the something, tight and grasping, which lay beneath Mareea's surface smiles and laughter, this ungenerous fighting of his mother, this wish to save and to hoard—it came from her pinched and meagre childhood. "My honey!" he cried. "My girl—I'll take care of you. Want shan't never touch you no more." He could have cried for that starved little Mareea, so sharp was his compassion, his wish to protect.

She knew what he was feeling. "You, Wes'—my, but you're good to me! Wes', my ol' boy, I do love you a lot —more as ever, Wes'."

The dear moment passed, they must talk again of the child, but they kept their arms entwined, and walked as one. "I never kinda imagined myself with a son," said Wes'. "No reason why, only I didn't. I'll hafta brace up and be a solid citizen from now on. Maybe let my whiskers grow like Great-uncle Nate's. An' you stop doin' all this heavy work, honey. You must take care yourse'f. No more choring outadoors till people in town say to me, 'Wes', I hear you got a grand new field hand out to your house!' I been ashamed enough of it, but now I put my foot down. You got to quit it."

"You put your foot down! You funny! I put my own foot down, an' I do as I like, Mist' Din."

"Now, Mareea, you be sensible. You talk to Mom—say, won't Mom be tickled! He'll be her first grandchild."

"Don' tell her, Wes', right off. You know she's goin' to be awful mad on us about that furnicher."

"No, she won't. She'll get over it, specially when she knows——"

"No, don't you tell her right yet. She hates me so."

"Don't keep on saying that, Mareea. Anyway, if you and Mom don't always get along so good, some of it's your fault."

"Most of it's hers."

"Aw, well, remember she's not so young as she used to be. Old folks have crotchety notions."

They let the argument slip away. Mareea was not worried about his mother's dislike. She had bested the old woman to-day, and in the past, and she could do it again in the future. And Wes' was so good, so kind, so loving to her. It was true, what she had said. She cared infinitely more for him than at first. Her love was growing, growing as the trees grew out of the land he owned. Perhaps, thought Mareea, her love for Wes' was a tree in her heart, and would grow on, always. Her hand tightened in his. "Yo' ol' boy," she said. "My, I'm glad you an' me got marry."

When they came back to the house Bob Tracy was in the parlour with Lucy. He stayed to supper and his presence made the hour easier. Only Allie Dean could

not force herself to speak to Mareea, or even to look at her. She had scored up another heavy mark against her daughter-in-law. And when she saw Wes', strangely solicitous, strangely, deeply happy, she wanted to strike him. Her resentment and anger against them increased beneath their indifference.

The next day, though it was wash day, she drove into town with Lucy and accomplished two pieces of business. She engaged Miss Estella Swann to come and stay in the house and make the wedding dress, and the dark blue silk which Lucy would wear to church for the first time after the ceremony—the coming out as a bride—a new black silk for herself, and a "dress for my son's wife. She hasn't decided yet what she wants." The other errand she did not tell. She went to Squire Fiske's law office and made a will leaving everything she had to Lucy, her heirs, and assigns. "I'd ruther the Tracys should have them than some other people," she told Squire Fiske when he pointed out to her that if Lucy should die without issue her husband would be the beneficiary.

The Squire shook his white head. "I don't like this kind of testament," he said. "There is something peculiarly repugnant to me about the harsh feelings of the living perpetuated after death in unnatural heiring. Your son may not have married to please you, Mrs. Dean, but he seems content with his choice. I advise you urgently to reconsider your decision."

"I have prayed over this," said Allie Dean bleakly, "before I come in here. My mind's made up."

"Very well," said Squire Fiske. "I will only remind you that at any time you wish to alter these provisions it is possible to do so. If you wrote another will yourself, signed it, and had it witnessed by two reliable persons it would render this one invalid."

Allie Dean longed to tell him that she had not come for advice, but no one said that sort of thing to Squire Fiske. She wrote her name in firm slanting letters and watched Bart Noble, the Squire's clerk, and old Walter Hignutt who happened to be waiting in the outer office, sign their names as witnesses with deep-breathed satisfaction. There was one blow for Maria. Allie Dean carried the will home and locked it in the little drawer below the oval looking glass on her dresser. The key she gave to Lucy. "You be careful of that," she warned her.

The wedding was to be in late February, that the young couple could have their short wedding trip and be settled in their home before the time for the spring ploughing, even though the season might be early. Bob Tracy had bought the old Potter farm on good terms and the interest on Lucy's money would almost carry the mortgage so their burden of debt was slight. His father gave him a pair of mules, one of his uncles a driving horse. Wesley gave his sister two cows and promised her some chickens and turkeys, these in addition to her store of excellent household linen. There were other gifts from relatives less near—the Coveys at Queenstown sent feather pillows and half a dozen silver spoons; the Saulsbury cousins provided a skittish young heifer, a damask tablecloth, and a set of green glass

fruit saucers; and their father, Great-uncle Nate, handed her with honest reluctance a wad of bills which when counted totalled twenty-five dollars—far more than Lucy had expected from the stingy old man. "Buy suthin' useful," he counselled. "Don't fritter it away in women's fal-de-dals."

Mareea was present at this transaction. "You didn' give Wes' an' me nothin' when we got married," she said. "How about that?"

Her impertinence started his wheezy, high-pitched chuckle. "That's a fact—that's a fact. An' if I did give you suthin' now, how'd you spend it, I'd admire to know?"

"I'd buy me some little pigs an' raise 'em."

He chuckled anew. "By cracky, I'll bring you over couple the nicest little shoats you ever laid eyes on, but you got to feed 'em yourself. An' they'll be your'n, not Wes's."

"You fetch 'em along, I'll feed 'em, Grandpa," promised Mareea. "An' I'll see Wes' don' get 'em."

Great-uncle Nate favoured Allie Dean with a twinkle of malice. "You cert'n'y are a nice change in the Dean family, Mareea," he declared. "You'll raise a monument to your ambition. What I like about you's your git-up-an'-git, as well's them snappin' black eyes and rosy cheeks. You're a real treat."

Allie Dean winced under his two-edged praise, but she remembered the will, and pretended not to notice. "Lucy and I are both real obliged to you for your present," she said to him smoothly. "It'll be put to

good use." After he had gone she said to Lucy, so that Mareea could not hear: "Shoats are three, four dollars apiece now—you might buy half a dozen with Unc' Nate's money and still have some over, if you wanted to." She made the incident a little secret triumph.

Miss Estella Swann came to sew in January. She was fat, free-spoken, quick, and sharp-eyed, and very competent. You had to put up with Miss Estella's comments and her prying curiosity if you wanted her best work. She would go into no houses where she didn't have a good time and feel free. She did not like Allie Dean, and would not have consented to sew for her but she loved doing wedding clothes, and she wanted overwhelmingly to get acquainted with Mareea. She talked every minute and told everything of everyone, adding fantastic conjectures of her own if the story was not spicy enough.

First she made the handsome black faille that was to be Allie Dean's festal garment, severely plain save for some small embellishments of jet. Miss Estella pleaded for lavender pipings, but in vain. "Not at my time of life," said Allie Dean. "It's not suitable."

After the black Miss Estella's shears cut into the length of deep blue for Lucy's coming out as a bride. Now she let her fancy have sway with double box pleatings and a splendid looped polonaise, cream lace frills at neck and wrists, and a frivolous bow with follow-me-lad streamers at the back of the collar. "A lot of boys are goin' to envy Bob Tracy's luck when they see you in that rig-out, Lucy," exulted Miss Estella.

"The colour brings out your eyes and sets off your skin and hair somethin' shameful."

This masterpiece achieved, there was a question of procedure. "Am I to tackle the weddin' dress next, or has Mis' Wes' decided what she wants? How about it, child?" she asked Mareea. "You goin' to let me make you a dress that'll turn that red Balt'mer silk of yours into somethin' fit fer nothin' but to feed the chickens in'? How about it?" She laughed loudly at her joke, and Mareea joined her.

"You go ahead an' make the weddin' dress," she said. "My red one's good enough for me."

"Oh, but you ought to have something new," demurred Lucy. "People'll think Wes' don't treat you right."

"I don' care what people think."

But Wes' came in soon after and Miss Estella appealed to him.

"Ain't you goin' to buy your wife a new dress for the weddin'?" she demanded. "You'd ought to."

"Who said I wasn't? You women cook up the queerest things. Mareea's goin' to have the finest dress of anybody, don't care what it costs."

"That's the way to talk," acclaimed Miss Estella. "That's the kind of husband to have. Wisht there was another like you layin' round loose where I could get 'im, Wes'."

"You should've told me before Mareea grabbed me, an' you wouldn't've needed another."

"You go along," said Miss Estella, her double chins

and fat bosom shaking with delighted laughter. "You're a case. A regular rascal. Well, I saw just the material for that dress," she continued, as Wesley went out again. "Not a faille, but a two-toned *broché*. Some ways you look at it, it's kind of gold colour, and other ways it's bronzy brown, and it has shoots of fire acrost it. Put you in that, Mis' Wes', and you'll be a regular Queen of Sheba."

"Sounds more like queen of the gypsies," said Allie Dean.

"No, Mis' Dean, you're wrong. It's not gay—it's just rich! And there's an uncommon look to it. I'm goin' in town and fetch you out a sample. It's at Blackiston's—he's only got a dress length, and it's a real bargain, 'way below its cost."

"If it's cheap I might get it, but no more dresses that cost so much," broke in Mareea. She could not help wanting the silk as Miss Estella told of it. She could see herself in it, she could feel its softness on her finger tips. But she did not want to be extravagant. "Clo'es only wear out, an' then your money's wasted," she added.

"That's a foolish way for a young pretty woman to talk," said Miss Estella. "Dress yourself up and look nice, no matter what it costs, since Wes's so willin'. Oh, I know," she caught Allie Dean's disapproving frown, "lots of people think a married woman ought to wear plain old duds, no style and no life in 'em. But I say no! Just because a woman's married's no reason she shouldn't make the most of her looks. Let a man get

to thinkin' his wife's willin' to wear cheap clo'es and he'll button up his pocket book tight every time she needs a gingham apern. But his eyes'll be drawin' right over to where there's some other woman all prettied up, let me tell you."

"Not if he's a good husband, and a good Christian," said Allie Dean.

"Husband or Christian, he's human, too. It's human nature to rather look at somethin' nice instead of somethin' ugly. You take my advice, Mis' Wes', and buy that *broché*. You'll be tickled to death with it."

Mareea had listened attentively. It was true there was no harm in letting Wes' see her looking pretty. And she knew that Allie Dean did not want her to have the dress. So she had two good reasons to buy it. "I think I'll get it if it's honest cheap," she said. "But—don't you make it too tight, Miss Stella!"

"What!" cried the dressmaker, catching at the significant tone. "Ho! I thought so—I just thought so. Yes, my dear, that purplish look under the eyes gives you away. I didn't peep, but I was noticin'. Well, well—a real nice piece of news." She laughed loudly.

For a moment Lucy did not comprehend—she looked questioningly at her mother. Allie Dean flushed under her pallor, pinched her lips together in a tighter line. She had suspected this, too, but she had not been sure, and she did not want to believe it. That this alien, outlaw blood should be perpetuated under the Dean name was hateful to her beyond expression. Mareea's traits and looks and ways intermingled with Wes's! Mareea's

child another hold on Wes'! An heir to the Dean possessions! Another reason to crowd her, Allie Dean, out of her home, to pass her by as negligible, to laugh at her authority and wisdom, to change her ways always for the worse!

Miss Estella was chittering on: "How you goin' to feel, bein' a grandma, Mis' Dean? I reckon you'll be right set up with yourself. The first grandchild's sure to get spoiled to death—but that's natural. Don't you worry about your new dress, honey, I'll fix it so's you can wear it right up to the warm weather."

Lucy understood now and she, too, flushed with anger. It was somehow insulting, an intentional injury that Mareea should be carrying a child while preparations for the wedding were going on. It offended Lucy's prudery. And to have it blurted out to Miss Estella and let the dressmaker's wagging tongue make a handle of it! This was more offense. Nice women kept silence about such a condition, denied it even when it was evident, stayed out of public notice. "She's not decent. she's like an animal," thought Lucy scornfully. She looked at her mother and knew that she was thinking the same.

"I'll cut you out some nice little patterns before I leave, for you'd ought to begin sewing pretty soon," went on Miss Estella gloatingly. "There's nothin' I love so well to do as to sew baby clo'es, teeny-weeny mites of stuff, with rolled hems aad lace whipped on so cunnin'. But my-o, I got to call a halt and get at the weddin' dress. I'll send a note in town next time any-

body goes in for your material, and I'll run it up the very last."

She unfolded the piece of fawn broadcloth Lucy had chosen to be married in and began to cut the skirt, but she was too pleased with the thought of the coming child to keep still about it. "It's a good luck prophecy, that's what it is, Mis' Dean, to have a bride and a baby coming under the same roof."

"Good luck for who?" asked Allie Dean.

"For both," responded Miss Estella, not dashed by the stiff question. "Sure's the world it's good luck for both. I'm a-goin' to make these new-fashioned revers if you fancy 'em, Lucy, in satin to match. They're all the go just now."

The finished wedding dress was elegant, Miss Estella declared, but when she began the *broché* she was happier. "I do love workin' with a real odd material," she exclaimed many times. She measured and fitted and measured and fitted Mareea with an almost comic anxiety, and when her work was done she stood back and acclaimed it. "I'll set that beside anything any Balt'mer mo-diste ever turned out and laugh in their faces. Yes, or Philadelphia. Mis' Wes', you are a picsher if ever I saw one!"

And Mareea, teetering before the insufficient mirror, was inclined to agree. The tawny lights and shadows of the stuff, gold and bronze, and ruddy-dark, repeated the gold and red of her soft skin, made her black eyes deeper, more brilliant. The simplicity suited her. Miss Estella had perpetrated no new-style revers, no box

pleats, no ruchings or polonaise. Her small head with its close-scalloped black hair rose out of the straight neck with a dramatic perfection of line. Lucy and Wesley gaped at her in astonishment. Only on Allie Dean was the enchantment lost. "I think it's outlandish and unfitting," was her comment.

"Then you don't know what you're talkin' about," Miss Estella replied with tart and final emphasis.

Chapter Thirteen

Lucy was married at home in the parlour; Wesley and Bob Tracy's sister stood up with the bridal pair. The room was crowded close and overheated. There were many silk dresses, long looped gold chains of jet and gold, wide bracelets, cameos, and hair brooches among the women; tight boots, polished at toe and dull at heel, black broadcloth, high collars, and gala neckties among the men. After the service there was a huge supper—ham, oysters, turkeys, chickens, salads, and spiced meats, with rolls and fancy breads and hot beaten biscuit and many sweets and sauces, followed by dessert of syllabub, frozen custard, moulded jellies, White Mountain cake, pound cake, fruit cake, almond balls, and every other intricate and unusual confection that lavish custom and tradition could provide. The guests were served in relays, and three times was the great table cleared, reset, and revictualled before the meal was declared over. Great-uncle Nate Saulsbury distinguished himself by eating straight through two tables, and showed no undue signs of repletion at the end of his feat. Four stalwart negro women toiled in the kitchen and pantry under Allie Dean's sharp supervision, to make the feast notable even in this land of good eating.

Mareea in her new dress bloomed like a golden flower

among the assembly and was as much observed. The other women blurred and lost significance beside her vitality. The bride was less noticed, less whispered about than Mareea, and she drew the young men to her in a close circle of attention and animation. Young Nate Saulsbury's wife was forced to pluck her husband from this circle when it was time to go home. Eddie Judge and Ryner Gaines, late flames of Lucy, supposed to be inconsolable about her marriage, showed no signs of their attributed grief as they disputed for place beside Mareea at table. Randall Covey, Cousin Fanny Covey's only son, who had driven all the way from Wye Mills for the wedding, told whoever would listen that when the canning house opened up next summer he'd be there to pick himself a wife, though he didn't believe there could be another such tid-bit. He hung after Mareea and paid her many compliments, to which she gave slight heed. "Silly fresh kid" was her inward comment on the gallant Randall. She tried very hard to be discreet with her admirers, to take the tone and manner of the other women. She did not wave her hands or shrug her shoulders except when she forgot, she was disarmingly civil to the Camerons, she kept the words Wesley did not like out of her speech, she helped with the supper as much as Allie Dean would permit, and she did not shout and jump with excitement as she wanted to do. For to her this was a great festival! So many people, such fine clothes, so much to eat! If only they would not be so serious and solemn, and if there might be music and dancing! She had suggested these to Wes-

ley, but he had told her "no"—they didn't dance and sing at weddings.

"But people ought to have fun at weddin's—people ought to like gettin' marry," she protested.

"Marriage is a sacrament, Mom says," replied Wesley, "and that means it's got to be slow and solemn."

"Well, I wish we was goin' to have fiddles, or even a couple accordeens. In Balt'mer when there was a weddin' we danced all night, an' we sang an' laughed—got drunk, too. Lots of wine an' whiskey for ev'ybody. Ain't you even goin' to have some wine an' whiskey, Wes'?"

Wesley lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "I'm goin' to let it be known that there's a keg of hard cider down to the barn, but it's got to be kep' mighty quiet. Meth'dists ain't supposed to touch liquor, but most of the old fellas get round that by not calling cider 'liquor.' And most of 'em's glad enough to take a swig when nobody's around. Don't you say nothing, Mareea."

So Mareea said nothing, but there was suppressed laughter in her eyes as she saw the men, one by one, slip out and reappear with bland smiles and a tendency to make ribald remarks on marriage in general and particular. She would have liked to run out, too, and take a glass with them for the jollity of it.

When the last table was served and cleared, and the bride and groom had driven away and the guests had begun to leave, Mareea felt a sudden sag in her enjoyment. She was among these people, but she was surely

not their kind. All her pretense of being so fooled none of them. The women's glances were not friendly. No, they were curious, that was all. They did not like her nor accept her. The men—yes, they liked her, but it was in that same grabbing hateful way men had always liked her. It was not by accident that they stood so close, touched against her elbows and shoulders, squeezed her hand so hard in saying good-bye. Mareea knew that Allie Dean and her circle had watched, noticing the way the men pressed about her, marking their familiarities. The older women did not offer Mareea any formal leave-taking—some nodded to her in a chilly fashion, some passed her by at a studied distance. But none slighted Allie Dean. They made it plain that they considered Allie Dean the ruling sovereign, and Mareea an upstart pretender. What use was her beautiful new dress, her careful politeness—why, none at all! She began to talk more loudly, to laugh with the lingering, fatuous Randall Covey, to make fun of the people—"That ol' billy-goat whisker Cameron," "funny ol' fat women like dress'-up butter tubs"—and Randall, enlivened by several trips to the cider keg, listened to all this with noisy approval.

"Say, you knock the spots off any girl I ever met. I sure am glad we're cousins—you know I'm your cousin, don't you? Honest! S'long's I'm your cousin you don't care if I call you 'Maria,' do you?"

"Maria ain't my name—Mareea's my name."

"Mareea, Maria, I don't care. You're the darnedest prettiest woman I've seen in a month of Sundays. Say

—you and Wes' must come over to visit at my house next summer. We'll have some fun. We'll go to the horse races at Queenstown and I'll take you out crabbing in my boat. You'd like that, I bet, Mareea."

"Sounds pretty nice." She yawned. She was tired. She wondered what Wes' was doing, why he didn't come in.

Randall looked about—everyone had gone except Great-uncle Nate who was drowsing audibly in an armchair by the window. He leaned toward her, trapped her in his arms.

"Kiss me good-bye, Mareea," he begged thickly. "'S all right for cousins to kiss——"

"Get out," she cried, pushing him away, "I don' want to kiss nobody——"

Allie Dean came to the door but they did not see her. She stepped back and waited, listening, out of sight.

"Aw, now, Mareea, don't get mad."

"Mad! I ain't mad at a drunk man. A drunk man's got no sense. But I ain't goin' to kiss you. Godlemighty, men always want kissin'——"

"You can't blame 'em. Come on, Mareea, just one——"

It was familiar rough and tumble to Mareea; she was not alarmed. Randall was merely another Frank Martucci or Jan Pavalek from the Baltimore tenements. "I'll smack your face till your head goes round if you don't let me go," she threatened. "Kiss you! I'd sooner go down in the stable and kiss the cows."

Outside Allie Dean held her breath, hoping, hoping!

If the little slut would only show her true nature—if Wes' could only be made to see how cheap and low she was! Here was the chance.

"Aw, you don't mean that," said Randall. "Say, how'd you come to take up with Wes', anyway? Whyn't you wait for me?"

Mareea had broken his grip and won distance from him. Now she laughed. "Me, I wanted a real man, not a drunk kid like you. Wes', he's wort' you a million times over."

("I believe she knows I can hear her," thought Allie Dean outside the door.)

Randall laughed, too. "All the same, you'd 've had a heap more fun with me. I'll show you when you come on that visit. You're coming, ain't you?"

Mareea shook out her crushed dress and started toward the door. "I don' know—you ask Wes'. If he wants to visit, I'll come."

Allie Dean stepped in, undisturbed, as if she had seen and heard nothing out of the way.

"Oh, you here, Randy," she said kindly. "I'm so glad you managed to get over to the wedding. I wisht Fanny had been here, too—but I knew I couldn't expect it, in her state of health. My, but she's had a long hard siege!" She began to push the furniture in place, set the room in order.

Randy steadied his wits and his legs. "Yes'm, Ma surely has been a sufferer. A drive this long would about lay her out. If she goes five mile she has to stay in bed a coupla days."

"But that don't need to hold you back. You can ride over any time you feel like it. You'd be more than welcome—we need young folks to brighten up the house now Lucy's gone. You come's often as you can—come real soon."

Randy was perplexed—Allie Dean had never been cordial to him. But between the hard cider and Mareea's eyes he was in no state to think clearly. "You should drive over and see Ma," he said cunningly. "She'd be pleased to death! You and—and—Cousin Mareea here could drive over together, if Wes' couldn't leave the farm work."

"We'll certainly do it, Randy." Allie Dean's voice was still warm and kind, but she planted the chair she was moving with unnecessary force and turned her face away. Randy saw nothing amiss, but Mareea had gone out and he wanted to follow. "Well—good-bye, Cousin Allie," he said. "It certainly was a fine weddin' and a fine supper—best I ever ate—a real old-timer. Don't forget to drive over to see Ma now, will you?"

Allie Dean shook hands with him. "No 'ndeed, Maria and I'll be over as soon as the cold weather lets up. Give Fanny my love and tell her I missed her to-day—she and I used to meet at all the fam'ly gatherings." She paused, struck by a sudden thought. "Why don't you stay the night, Randy? It's getting late and night driving's none too pleasant this time of year. We'd all be real pleased to have you."

But Randy did not mind night driving and his mother would worry if he wasn't there in the morning. No, he'd

better go. And go he did, leaving Allie Dean intent on the thought of him.

"I'm glad this towse is over," said Wesley, coming in. "I'm beat out. My new boots been aching my feet like toothache. Who's that in the parlour—Great-unc' Nate? He going to stay all night? He better. He et so much it's not safe for him to start off by himself."

"I asked Randy to stay, too, but he wouldn't. Randy's grown up to a real nice boy, Wes'. I told him to come over again real soon."

Wes's boots had affected his temper. "What in time did you do that for? Randy's a poor stick, don't think about a thing but women and liquor. He was out at the cider oftener'n anybody else to-day."

"Maria liked him."

Wesley scowled but made no reply to that. "Here's some money to pay off the women," he said. "Let's get the house clear. I can't breathe."

Mareea came in at that moment. She, too, was suffering from the let-down of the festivity's end, but she was still lovely in her new dress. "I'll wake up Unc' Nate—he's better goin' home."

"He better stay here—he ain't in no state to drive a horse."

"Aw ri'," yawned Mareea, "I tell 'im." She went into the parlour but returned laughing. "He won' stay—he says I'm a dunce. He's gone out the front door to get his buggy."

"You'll have to help him, Son."

"I can't walk another step in these here boots."

"I get your other shoes, Wes'—wait a minute." Mareea ran upstairs and brought them. "Here's your bootjack—pull off them ol' tight things."

Under these ministrations Wes' relaxed. "You look awful nice, Mareea," he said, struggling with the boots. "You looked nicer'n anybody here."

"That's what Randy said, too," put in Allie Dean. "He certainly admired Maria."

Wesley went out to help Great-uncle Nate, and the two women were left together.

"How'd you like to ride over to Randy's place some time right soon and get acquainted with his mother? She's my own cousin—that makes Randy a second. She's been ailing quite a while."

"I don' care. Some time, maybe. He's too fresh, that Randy."

Allie Dean went out to the kitchen to pay off and send away the women helpers. She felt that she had gone far enough at the moment. She was working in the dark, but she must seize at every circumstance, however slight and indirect, to injure and pull down Mareea in Wes's eyes. "If she wasn't going to have a child," she thought, "I might work it. I could show her up for what she is. It's my Christian duty."

"Here's your money," she said to the women in the kitchen. "Did you get a plenty supper? Now I'm going to give each of you a portion to take home to your families. Reach me some paper out of that draw' and fetch the meat and cake that was left."

She arranged the shares evenly, the delighted, ex-

claiming women running back and forth with the leavings of the feast. Meanwhile her thoughts went on and on: "With a child she'll have a bigger hold over Wes'. But if she took to carrying on with Randy it would only look worse, having a child. Once I was rid of her there'd be some peace and quiet and decency in this house again. Once I was rid of her . . ."

Wes' had returned chuckling from starting Great-uncle Nate on his way. "That old man's the beateree," he said. "What's the matter, Mareea, honey? You all tired out, too? No wonder, it's been a stiff day."

To her husband Mareea could reveal her mood. "I'm tire' enough, but not in my arms an' legs. It's in my heart I'm tire'. These mean ol' people round here, they look at me, they look an' loo-ook, like I was crazy. I try to be so nice an' polite, an' all I got was ugly eyes turn on me."

"Why, I thought you got along with everybody just fine. Mom was sayin' how Randy Covey admired you——"

"Yes, him! An' other men, plenty. But not the women an' girls. They wasn't nice to me, Wes'."

"They're just jealous because they're not so good-looking, that's it. They're mad because they ain't pretty like you. No woman as pretty as you are c'n expect other womenfolks to like her."

"Belle is pretty, an' ev'ybody likes her."

"Oh, well, she was born and raised here and everybody knows her folks. But Belle ain't as pretty as you

are, honey-girl. She's not to be named in the same day." He went over to her, tipped her face up to his, and kissed her fondly. "You'd ought to find something better to worry about than being prettier than the other girls, you little dumpling. Say, I'm going to bed." He yawned mightily and stretched himself, picked up his tight boots and stalked wearily toward the stairs. "Ain't you coming?"

"In a minute—I help your mom."

It occurred to her that he had not locked the stables and that she would go out and make the round alone. She wished for solitude. After the crowded, unsatisfactory day she needed air, space, isolation. It took some time to find the old shawl, stowed out of sight in preparation for the wedding, but at last she dragged it from the chest and hid the shimmer of her dress. With the keys in her hand she went out into the clear dark.

It was better out here. She hugged the shawl around her and ran down the lane wildly, the wind sweeping her along. The dog, who had been neglected and forgotten all day, leaped round her and she talked to him. "Good Nick—good old Nicko! Mareea's glad to see you —Mareea's glad to run with you. You a good fella, nice an' quiet an' sense, not like these people to-day." She knew that the dog understood. Yes, and in the stable the horses and cows understood. They were quiet and kind, they stretched damp muzzles to her caressing hands. She threw armfuls of hay into the mangers already half filled, because of her need to do something for

them in gratitude. She felt their kinship, their nearness, their acceptance of her with no question, no reservation. Horses and cows and dogs and chickens—they were better than people—oh, much, much better than people. All except Wes'. But he was not people—he was her heart and life.

She locked the doors, all of them, and reluctantly faced the wind on her way back. How much nicer it would be if she climbed the hayloft and slept there in the hay while the horses munched and stamped sleepily beneath. But no, she was a lady now—Missis Din—and she could not do wild things. If she slept in the hayloft that sour mother of Wes's would be more than ever sour and hateful, though that did not matter. The thing that did matter was that Wes' wouldn't be there. "I love my Wes'," said Mareea aloud to the dog. "I love him so much." Here in the cold windy night, alone, she forgot that she had ever thought of his land, of his money. They were good, but Wes' himself was better. "He thinks I am prettier than the other women, an' I know he is better than the other men," she murmured, and the dog wagged himself around her in ecstatic parabolas. It was very sweet to feel this warm, forgetful love of Wes'. It was always growing, it was always waiting for her, it would stay with her, it wrapped her round like the warm shawl. She could not recall one unkind, one untender word from him; he was always good, always gentle.

Allie Dean met her at the door fretfully, but Mareea hung up the keys and shawl without reply. She ran up-

stairs. Wes' was fast asleep; he had left the lamp turned low for her. Hurriedly she undressed and slipped in beside him, careful not to disturb him. She hoped drowsily that her son would look exactly like him, exactly. It would be so dear, so delightful to have two Wes's in the house, a husband, a son, a big Wes' and a little one!

Chapter Fourteen

It was no use to tell her that she must not work out-of-doors, that she must rest and go softly because of the coming child. Mareea only laughed and took her way to the garden and the flower beds more determinedly. All through the spring and early summer she worked the friendly earth, planting, hoeing, waging war on cutworms and devouring bugs with bitter relentlessness. She would not wear the sunbonnet which Miss Estella Swann, driving in one day to bring the promised baby patterns and seeing Mareea bareheaded in the heat and glare of noon, had at once sat down and made and given her, warning her volubly of stroke and dizziness, to say nothing of being burned black as a nigger.

Yet it was a pretty sunbonnet, a bright rosy calico with a stitched hood and a becoming wide ruffle, far more attractive than the plain slatted black-and-white gingham affair that Allie Dean stuck on her head every time she went out, even to the spring house. Mareea admired the rosy bonnet and thanked Miss Estella, but she would not wear it. The sun was never too strong for her. And was she not already burned black? Why try to ward off a condition already existing?

Belle, too, came to see her and exclaimed with horror at Mareea's skin. "You ought to wash your face in

buttermilk every night and rub it with strawberry juice, or the inside of a cucumber rind, whenever you think of it," she directed. "You shouldn't let yourself go."

"But I am never pink and white like you, Belle. I am always brown."

"You'll be black," prophesied Belle, following Miss Estella. "And besides, I don't think it's good for you—in your condition." Belle whispered the last, though they were in the garden far from any listening ears. But Belle was unmarried, and even her hardy spirit could not break through the tradition that it was indelicate for an unmarried woman to do aught but whisper of this particular process of nature.

"Pooh! I'd like my boy to be born in the sunshine."

This statement, made aloud, was horrible but fascinating to Belle. "Oh, Mareea, you're simply awful!" she giggled.

Mareea passed this by. "Look at my garden," she commanded. "Ain't it fine? We never have had such a fine garden, Wes' says, so early, so strong."

"The flowers look nice, too. D'you take care of 'em? Quite a job, I should say, and gets you so dirty."

"I take care all the flowers, all the veg'table, all the chicken, an' when Missis Din go to stay with Lucy, all the milk—but I am not very good with butter yet. I make Wes' get me a colour' woman sometimes for the butter—yes, an' the cookin'. I don' even like my own cookin', Belle." She laughed at this confession.

Belle could not imagine a woman who had no ambition

to excel in cooking. "You ought to learn to cook. I'll let you have some of my recipes."

"I don' want 'em."

"But you *ought* to learn to cook, Mareea. Every married woman ought to be able to cook. Suppose something should happen to Wes's mother?"

"I could bear that."

Belle giggled again. "You are awful! But you know—men expect their wives to be good cooks."

Mareea's lips took their most lovely curve. "Wes' don't. An' Wes' can't eat my cookin' no more as I can. He don' mind. Oh, Belle, I'm sorry you couldn' marry Wes', I'm almos' sorry that sour-face Manie couldn', because he's so nice. You'll never find a man so nice if you look a thousan' years. I say I'm sorry you didn' marry him, Belle, but I only mean if there was another one of him. I couldn' spare my own Wes'. He is a *good man!*"

Belle had recovered from her infatuation for Wesley—another beau had come forward to soothe her vanity and surround her with attention. Therefore she received this statement of Mareea's without interest save as an indication of Mareea's own state of mind. "Oh, I reckon there's just as good fish in the sea as ever was caught! Not but what Wes' is all right. But I tell you, Mareea, if you want to keep him, you better learn to cook."

"If I have got to cook to keep him, he will leave me," declared Mareea.

Nor would she try to sew for her child. Reluctantly, ungraciously, Allie Dean hunted through old trunks and

attic boxes and brought out clothing of the babyhood of Wesley and Lucy. She put these where Mareea could see them, keeping back the finer garments until Lucy might need them. Miss Estella, when she saw her patterns and pieces unused, made some slips and petticoats and added a good scolding to the gift, a scolding which made Mareea laugh until she ached. Belle good-naturedly crocheted a sacque and a blanket. But Mareea would do nothing. She kept on with her garden, every day, bringing her harvest into the house with a flaunting pride. You might have imagined, thought Allie Dean, that nobody had ever worked a garden before in the world, the way she acted.

In the evening Mareea sat beside Wesley on the side porch and held tightly to his hand or leaned against him with his arm around her. They talked in lowered voices, though there was nothing secret in what they said. It was nearly all about the farm. Mareea had learned so much. In answering her questions Wesley had sharpened his own wits, and her vital concern with each detail quickened his interest. He had been dickering from time to time for a pointed field owned by old man Perry, their nearest neighbour, which made a dent in his boundary lines. There seemed to be no way to get it save by paying a price beyond reason, and there was not, at this time, much ready money in Wesley's hands. Lucy's wedding had cost him a round sum. He had paid for his fertilizer, bought a hay rake and another cow, and this, with the long pull of spring work with men to pay and little to sell, made him feel poor. So the three-cornered field

must wait until harvest was over and he could sell his wheat. If the creamery was built there would be a market for the milk in bulk without the work and waste of making butter. Mareea listened intently to every word.

"Next year I raise more chickens, Wes'—spring chickens to sell early. That would bring a lot of money. An' if the creamery builds, we will buy more cows. We could sell enough milk each week to pay the men."

"If you've got a lot of cows, you have to buy a lot of feed at the mill, shorts and bran and middlings. But you get more manure and that cuts the fertilizer bill. And then, there's the calves. Market for early calves's always pretty good."

"You could write it all down on paper, an' find out if it is gain or loss. You know, like they do in the factories. I seen the men writin' in big books. Every day they write, write, an' I ask what it's all for, an' they say to keep track of the money they take in an' send out."

"'S all right for a factory, but on a farm it'd just be a lot of bother and I'd not be sure I was right when I was done."

She prodded his inertia. "But how else can you tell? You don' want to lose any money. We need our money, every penny."

"It's thisaway, honey. If you've got something over at the end of the year, you know you made a gain. If you've not got anything, you know you've lost. There it is, simple and complete. I always say that's the sure test, having it or not having it."

"But we must have it."

"Don't you worry, we will. The wheat's coming on fine, and I never had a better stand of hay. It's too early to tell much about corn, but I always've had a good crop of corn 'cept five years ago, when it rained all August and drowneded out everything, so barring such another flood, or a bad drought, it'll come along as per usual. And then there's the cannery peas and tomatoes."

Mareea was dissatisfied. "There ought to be some sure way to know about the money you make."

Wesley explained his economic theories further. "Over to the Agricultural College there's some professors been talking a good bit about how farmers ought to keep books and accounts, but I had to laugh when I heard it. A farm ain't like a store nor a factory. To begin with, you raise most everything you eat, your chickens and eggs and milk and pork and potatoes and apples and garden truck, and you trade in enough at the store for your coffee and sugar and tea and kerosene and things you can't raise. Now, how you going to keep track of that, I want to know? It'd take all your time, night and day. And then your cattle, and your crops—they'd be just as hard a proposition. What I say is these professors ought to get out in the field with a plough more and they'd change their minds about a whole lot of things."

Mareea let it go with a sigh. "I mean our boy to be a farmer. Smart an' strong an' makin' money. An' nice like you, Wes'."

Wes' tightened his arms around her. "I hope he'll have your big eyes, that's what I hope. Ever' time I

think about him I see him with big black eyes like yours, honey, snapping and flashing round like yours do."

"I ruther he look like you."

"You can't have your ruthers. He's got to look like you. I wisht you wouldn't work out so much, though, with the time so near."

"Oh, well, I don't care if he's born in the p'tata patch."

This shocked Wes' so deeply, so direly, that she had to explain she only meant it in fun. But actually she thought it wouldn't be at all bad.

She had made no demands, she had been well and gay and contented, had seemed to have no nerves, no fancies. But at the last, when she knew that there was no more than a week or two before the birth, she asked that Berta be sent for, old Berta whom she almost never mentioned, almost never seemed to remember or regret.

Allie Dean instantly opposed it. It was her first opportunity for some time to thwart Mareea. In all these long months there had not been one word exchanged between them about the coming child, and save for the bringing out of the baby clothes Allie Dean had appeared unaware of it. Mareea had asked nothing of her, told her nothing, and this intensified her grudge. Now that the girl had expressed a wish she was determined to deny it. "I don't see why you should have anybody else around—I'll be here, and Aunt Dula Wheeler, and Wes'll send for the doctor soon's your pains start. Another woman'll be just clutter."

"I want Berta," repeated Mareea, "I want Berta, I

want her here. I want Berta." Her eyelids fluttered up and down, rare tears gathered below them, and her under lip quivered. "I want Wes' to write to her to come on the boat, to send her five dollars so she can come nice, like a lady."

Wes' was more than willing. "Of course, I'll do it right off, honey. Don't you cry. That ol' woman won't be in the way, Mom. I'll write the letter and take it in town this very night."

"I'll take it—I'm going in this afternoon," said Allie Dean. "I'm all out of baking powder and vanilla and the flour's low——"

"I don't want you to take it," said Mareea, reading her mind.

"What d'you mean by that, Maria?" asked Allie Dean, sharp and low.

Wes' intervened. "Now, Mom, she's notional, she don't mean nothing. I'll take the letter, Mareea, don't you worry, hon."

He sat down at the desk to write and Mareea and Allie Dean exchanged penetrating looks behind his unconscious back. Allie Dean had meant fully to destroy the letter, and Mareea knew it. And Allie Dean was aware that Mareea knew. She went out into the kitchen to nurse her spleen.

Every blow she meant to strike Mareea was somehow averted, every evil frustrated. Her half-formed plan to draw on Randall Covey and give him opportunity to compromise the girl and discredit her in Wes's eyes had come to nothing. Mareea would not visit the Coveys

without Wes', and Wes' said bluntly that he saw no reason to go, Cousin Fanny made him tired with her airs and complaints, and Randy was worse, and anyway they never had visited back and forth much and he wasn't going to start it up. When Randy had driven over to the Deans' Mareea was working in the garden and would not come in, and he had been forced to leave without seeing her, for he had not Belle's courage to seek her out where she was. He felt that her behaviour was a slight and he did not come again—it would be lowering himself to let a mere canning-house girl slight him twice.

Yet Allie Dean knew that her plan would have failed even if Mareea had not been rude. She could not help but see, much as she hated it, the ever-growing close affection between her son and his wife. It shut them off from her, it wrapped them round, protected them, kept her at a distance, and made her worst moods and hardest strictures vague and of no moment. Sometimes when she spoke to Wes'—she said very little to Mareea—she would find him gazing at his wife, unhearing, and Mareea sunk as deep in his eyes as he in hers. It seemed monstrously indecent to Allie Dean that a man and woman should be so openly in love. Yet they used few endearments, fewer caresses in her sight—indeed, not so many as Lucy and Bob who were gigglingly, kittenishly enamoured of each other. Allie Dean found that normal. It was this still devotion, this completed, centred, enveloping passion which she resented and detested. She had ever before her eyes the way she had

seen them in the barn, the day they had danced there unaware of her peeping. She imagined them alone together, and her venom grew. "They act like they was Adam and Eve," she confided to Lucy in one of her visits. "And it's all her doing. Wes' never would have been a moony fool with a woman who was the right kind."

As she stood now, thinking of these things, she decided that she would not stay in the house if that dirty old foreign woman was to enter it. She would go to Lucy and she would take Lucy two more of her best quilts, some of the fine sheets, and the big tablecloth of satin damask. Perhaps she could slip in some of the gold-edged plates. In the coming confusion not even Mareea would notice that these things had disappeared. If she could not do her a big injury, she would do her a small one. She justified this petty pilfering with the thought that Mareea knew nothing of the care of fine linen—she knew no expert ways of washing and bleaching—why, she couldn't even iron a kitchen towel fit to be seen.

But when she told Wesley she was going, he begged her to stay. "I hate to have nobody in the house but Aunt Dula Wheeler. S'pose something goes wrong before the doctor gets here."

"You'll have that awful old woman she's sent for. She'll have to do. I don't feel able to stand the strain and the fuss. I'm not so young as I was once."

She saw his stricken, anxious face, and for an instant she was ashamed. Her heart yearned to her son. "If you

need me, you send over to Lucy's," she said. "And why don't you get Tom Bowers's wife to come and be handy? She's a good cook and a settled sensible woman."

"Yes, I c'n get her, I s'pose. But I'd ruther you was here. We c'd have Cora Bowers, too, Mom, and she'd take the heavy work off you." He looked at her with his pleading, blue-eyed, little-boy look that she had never before resisted. But now she did. She was thinking that if she was not here—and anything should go wrong, if anything *should*—Mareea would lack her expert help and experience, and just that absence might—might—no, she did not quite dare formulate it. But she did not yield to Wes's pleading.

The day before Berta was expected she drove off very straight in the buggy, with the quilts and linen and the plates underneath the seat. Wes' had not seen her take them, nor Mareea. She had locked her bedroom closet, her bureau, and the cupboard with the remainder of the best china and the silver spoons. But she had salved her conscience by doing an extra big baking. The pantry was full of cakes and pies and bread and biscuit. The food safe held cooked meats. They couldn't *starve*, she assured herself. She chose a time to leave when Mareea was far down in the garden, and did not say good-bye to her.

The next day Berta came and Wesley met her at the boat. She had done honour to the visit by buying a hat, a white hat with black ribbons which balanced itself riskily above her wizened old face, and she had denied

herself her custom of tying her worldly goods in a bundle, and had packed them in a second-hand straw telescope bag, which she felt was stylish. She was very happy to come, very much in awe of Wesley.

Once in the house she fell upon Mareea with a thousand embraces and a spouting torrent of English-Bohemian conversation. She discarded the grand hat, took off her shoes, went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee, and was rapturously at home. Oh, the fine house, the beauty house! Oh, the fine flowers, the garden, the chickens, the milk and cream! "You fell in the fat, my girl," she told Mareea over and over. "The richest of fat."

Wesley had expected to find her annoying. He had been ashamed to drive through Eden with the funny old gnome when he had brought her from the boat landing, but he found himself liking her, depending on her. Part of the liking came from her great deference, her open admiration for him and all his ways. He was as handsome, as grand as the Mayor of Baltimore! He was grander than the captain of the steamboat! He was as rich as milord the count, owner of the fertile valley she had left so many years ago to cross the wide green sea! She ran to fetch his pipe, his boots, his hat, she beamed and ducked her head when he smiled upon her. She checked her wagging tongue in his august presence, and when she did speak it was to say what she knew he wished most to hear—that Mareea was well, was strong, the coming ordeal would be easy, the child would be

strong, healthy, beautiful! She knew all the signs, did Berta—who better! She went out along the roadside and through the garden and gathered a bunch of herbs and simples, tied them with a specially knotted string, and hung them over Mareea's bed. There was a charm for safety!

Besides her magic she had a practical worth. She padded briskly about the kitchen, her sleeves rolled up, a big apron over the unconfined rotundities of her figure, and cooked any number of excellent dishes which, though strange to Wesley's taste, were so artfully seasoned and spiced that he enjoyed them. She washed and scrubbed and kept such order that Allie Dean herself could have found no fault. Each pot or pan or knife or fork was put straight back in place after using. She kept the furniture exactly where it had been when she came into the house. Nothing might deviate an inch from where she found it.

Her presence was good for Mareea. She waked and grew more lively, teasing the old woman, mocking her, pretending she could not eat her soups and stews, her sweet pancakes, her bread with caraway and raisins, but all the while showing how glad she was to see her again. "I would send for you before, Berta," she said, "but for Missis Din, his mother. She would be bad to you. It is fine she went away, for—listen—I could not trust her with my baby! That is why I must have you here. Don' tell Wes', he would never believe me. But she hates me so, she wants to do me a hurt. So, you see, even if she had stayed, like I thought she was to do, I must

have you here to watch her an' 'take care of my baby."

Berta crossed herself. "An evil woman, a witch! Holy Virgin protect us!"

"No, not a witch—but I make her very mad, an' she makes me mad, an' when people are mad they do wicked things, you know it. She is stiff an' mean, she never lets go to herself, inside, an' so her meanness stays there, an' works an' works, an' gets blacker an' meaner. If she'd slap my face, an' holler sometimes, she'd be all right. But no, she waits to do something awful to me. I see her waitin', sneaky an' mean, allatime. When I am well an' strong I don' care for her at all—I am no more afraid of her as of a cow in the pastcher—but if I am in bed with a little baby, all weak—well, I don' know. She might grab a chance at me. So I say to myself, 'Berta will come, Berta will watch, Berta will take care.' An' then, so nice, so lucky, Missis Din she rides off to Lucy's house an' don' come back! An' now you come—so ev'ything will be all right."

"Sure ev'ything will be all right," boasted Berta. "I'd never let nobody hurt you, my dove, nor your little baby—no, I'd put my body before you an' they'd have to strike me down dead before they could come at you."

And everything was all right. The child was born on a Sunday morning, late in August, while Wes' was galloping into town for the doctor. When they came young Wesley had arrived, and Berta and Aunt Dula Wheeler and Tom Bowers's wife had done all that was needful. He was a big boy, red, strong-legged, with lungs

which he used to the full extent of their power. Aunt Dula Wheeler washed and dressed him, and then passed him to Berta while she tended Mareea. Berta, unobserved, pricked his tiny right forefinger with a needle so that he would never be a thief, and told Mareea the reason the baby bawled so loud was because he was calling for his mother. "The finest little man I ever saw," said Berta. "He's sure to be lucky. I looked at the stars last night an' they were right for his fortune. A Sunday's child, too! And he's got no hair—a bald-headed baby's bound to be rich and great! Yee—ee, little cabbage, little pot of cream, be quiet, and I'll take thee to thy mammy!"

"What colour are his eyes, Berta?" Mareea whispered.

"Blue—blue as the sky, and the Virgin's robe and the tall flowers in your garden, my darling. Such blue eyes I never saw in a baby before! Straight out of heaven, they are!" Berta exaggerated, but the baby's eyes were certainly blue. And the first thing Mareea said to her husband when he and Doctor George came hurrying into the room was:

"He's got your eyes."

Chapter Fifteen

"If I was you, Lucy, I'd strain off that curd, else it'll be stringy." Allie Dean was deftly skimming cream from the stoneware pans in Lucy's dairy, pans exactly like her own at home, gray with rough sweeping blue bands and flowers. Lucy was printing a pat of butter with the wooden mould carved with a sickle and a sheaf of wheat. Near by stood the pan of curd. Warm water had been poured over a dish of clabber and the curd had gone down in a sea of greenish whey. When the curd was drained it would be salted and mixed with thick cream for cottage cheese. Bob Tracy was very fond of cottage cheese and Lucy made it fresh every day. Her mother thought she overdid it, and Lucy was aware that beneath the suggestion to strain the curd was criticism, disapproval. She went on with her butter printing and made no reply. All very well at home, her mother's direction and command—that was her mother's house—but this was Lucy's and she wanted to do as she pleased, wanted it recognized that she was a perfectly competent housewife and manager. Marriage had released her clinging instincts from her mother and attached them to Bob, and Bob thought she was a marvel with the dairy work.

"I said, you'd better strain off that curd, else it'll be

stringy, Lucy—you've about done your butter," repeated Allie Dean, a slight edge in her voice.

Lucy made her last print very slowly and with ostentatious care, drawing out the action as much as she could. "Oh, I don't think it'll be stringy if it stands a little longer," she said. "I want to wash up the butter things first."

Nothing more than that, but Allie Dean understood, as well as though Lucy had shouted it, that her visit would better come to an end. She had stayed on and on, thinking of course Wesley would send for her, that they wouldn't be able to get along without her, and August had run out and September was nearly done, but no summoning word had been uttered. Wesley had reported the safe arrival of the baby, but his mother's desertion rankled in him, and he said no more than that he supposed she'd be driving over to take a look at her first grandchild sometime pretty soon. And she had said, "Yes, of course"—but neither of them could be cordial.

"Is that old foreign woman there?" Allie Dean asked.

"Yes, she's there," answered Wesley Dean.

"And I s'pose you had Aunt Dula?"

"Yes, and the doctor. And Mareea got through fine, not a bit of trouble."

Her bitterness overflowed at this. "I see I wasn't needed," she said.

And Wesley had looked at her as if she were a stranger and not his dear and honoured mother. "No, you wasn't needed," he had agreed. It had not been a pleasant moment for Allie Dean. Then he had driven away and

not come back. All the news his mother and sister received about the younger Dean household came from third parties.

Lucy had been restive under this disregard of family convention. From time to time she had remarked nervously to her mother that people would think it very queer if they didn't go to see the child, and she discussed with Bob the chance of a visit made without her mother's knowledge, but had not the enterprise to carry out such a plan.

Lucy really wanted to go. Time and her own married importance and detachment had softened her feeling toward her brother's wife, and she was curious besides. But Allie Dean had been so sharp in maintaining that they'd not been invited, and that she wouldn't go anywhere she was so plainly not wanted, that Lucy did not try to over-ride her. Besides, Lucy had felt in her mother's attitude something deeper than mere slighted pride, an unfathomable, malignant under-current which awed and frightened the younger woman, about which she dared ask no question, into which she dared not penetrate. Her mother had changed, she was more stern, less reasonable. She was severe on the least contradiction. Her smile was never true, she was often absent-minded, brooding. Lucy ignored the possible reason, but she and Bob had agreed that Allie Dean's continued presence was a trial, and this had driven Lucy to the hint that in the matter of cottage cheese she must at least be free.

She was aware of the inhospitable implication behind

the hint. "There's such a thing as right," she told herself. "If a married woman can't have her own say-so in her own house, where can she have it? Just because Mom's always ruled at home is no reason why she should rule here. And she's so cranky, and so gloomy, and so sharp on everything, she's no pleasure to be with any more. Bob can't open his mouth but she takes him up. I don't see why my husband should put up with such treatment when he's kindness itself to her." The trouble was that Lucy had a new authority to bow down to, a new centre of existence. She was absorbed with matrimony and had scant understanding or forbearance left for any other relation.

Allie Dean had not suspected that she was wearing out her welcome with Lucy, that her instruction and direction were resented. She had been so wrapped in her inner conflict that she had continued to deal with Lucy as she had always done at home, unmindful of her changed estate. She had assumed that Lucy shared her feeling, would support her in any line of conduct. Now, a bolt from the blue, came this declaration of independence. Her own daughter turned against her, as well as her son! She finished skimming the cream, emptied the milk, and prepared to scald the pans and skimmer. But she did not know what her hands were doing. She could not answer Lucy, and she could not force herself to talk of other things and pretend that she wasn't feeling the deliberate unfilial affront.

She did not blame herself for it, however. "Nobody wants me, I'm nobody any more, nothing," she thought,

and pitied herself profoundly. She looked back and saw that it was all the fault of Maria. If Maria had not trapped Wesley into marriage all her old life with its order and dignity and peace would have gone on, and she would not have become a homeless wanderer and cumberer of the earth.

By supper time she had sufficient control of herself to say, carelessly, "I believe I'd better be starting on home to-morrow. We've had no word from Wes' and it makes me uneasy in my mind. No telling what that passel of strange women will be up to, and I expect he's near-about starved, unless Tom Bowers's wife's there."

Lucy seized the moment. "I'll drive over with you," she exclaimed. "I certainly do want to get a look at that baby! But I hate to have you go, Mom." This was so plainly an afterthought that Allie Dean's eyes filled with burning tears, and her chin quivered. Neither Lucy nor Bob Tracy noticed her agitation. They were relieved and glad that she was going.

Lucy went on talking. "It seems so funny to think of Bud with a little boy. I hope to goodness he won't take after Mareea—Maria," she corrected herself hastily. "We don't want any more Italians in the family."

"She's real good-looking—you've got to admit that," said Bob Tracy.

"She pulls the wool over the eyes of all the men—I'll admit *that*. They see her all dressed up and think she's something wonderful. I just wish you'd've been there when Bud brought her home in her old canning-house

rags, and no shoes, and *smell*—it turns my stomach to think about it."

"And I don't want to hear about it," said Allie Dean. "If you don't mind, Lucy, I won't help with the dishes. I'll go up to my room and lay down—my head aches me."

"Now, Mom, if you're not well, you mustn't go away to-morrow. I won't let you."

"I'm all right—I think this headache comes from my eyes. I expect my glasses need changing. I'm getting old."

She went wearily upstairs. "I'll take my sorrows to my Saviour," she murmured. "I'll cast my burden on the Lord. It's too heavy for me to bear alone. Despised and supplanted, driven from my own roof, and now from my daughter's, where is there any comfort to be found except in prayer?" But she did not pray for a submissive spirit, nor that her trouble might be sanctified to her. She could only petition that the hand of the Lord might be heavy in vengeance on those who had so abused one of the most devoted of His children.

"Eye for eye—tooth for tooth . . .

"Burning for burning, stripe for stripe, wound for wound . . .

"The Lord shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies. . . .

"The Lord shall smite thee with madness and blindness and astonishment of heart. . . .

"Thou shalt beget sons and daughters but thou shalt not enjoy them; for they shall go into captivity. . . ."

Oh, there are many comforting texts to be found in Exodus and Deuteronomy! But none of them comforted Allie Dean. It was not the promise, but the fulfilment of the promise which she awaited. And it seemed long in coming.

There was no sign of her spiritual travail when she drove away with Lucy the next day, her valise at her feet. Both women were excited over the visit. "I s'pose Bud'll be out in the field," said Lucy. "I hope he'll come in, I do want to see him." She added irrelevantly: "You don't suppose they'd put that old woman to sleep in your room, do you?"

"I won't be surprised at anything. Well, she'll have to sleep somewhere else once I'm there, I can tell you."

"I bet the house'll be a pig pen. I'll help you clean up, Mom."

"I can manage."

They tried to talk of other things but it was no use. Soon they were back at the old topic.

"I s'pose she's up and around again."

"I should think so. I was up six days after you were born, and it's—let's see—considerable over a month for her."

"Mom, what do you suppose they'll name him?"

"Something outlandish if she has any say about it."

"Oh—that'd be awful! Bud surely wouldn't let her."

"Bud's right under her thumb. Thinks everything she does is just right." She bit out the words viciously.

There was a little silence. "It's certainly a warm day for so late—I oughtn't to drive so fast. But I don't know

—I feel as if something was pushing us on to get there."

"I don't believe in warnings."

"I don't either, Mom—all the same, that's the way I feel. I wish I'd made a present for the baby. I could've knit a sacque or a blanket."

"You can tell her you're going to against the cold weather."

"Yes, I'll do that." She hesitated and then came out with a small secret. "Bob said I was to give Bud two silver dollars, one from him and one from me, to start the baby's bank. Wasn't that nice of Bob?"

"Yes, that was very nice."

"He gave me the money—he just happened to have two new dollars. He said he was glad he had 'em, new money makes the right present for a baby."

"I hope she'll appreciate it."

"Who—Mareea?"

"I wish you'd call her 'Maria.'"

More silence. Lucy could not stay snubbed, it was so amazing to be going to see her brother's child. "I'm in a real twitter," she confessed. "I feel almost chilly in spite of the heat."

"There's no need to get wrought up. We all come into the world the same way. One child more or less don't make much difference."

"But in our own family—and your first grandchild."

Allie Dean brought out more corroding words. "I see no use in pretending that I welcome this child in our family any more than I welcome its mother."

"But he might take after the Deans, Mom. He might not be a bit like Mareea—Maria."

They were turning into the lane. The flower beds in front of the house had never been more trim and tidy, more full of bloom. Late zinnias, asters, golden glows, and bright button chrysanthemums—none had missed their former mistress. Both women looked at the windows. All the curtains were in place, the shades drawn to proper evenness. The yard was swept and raked, the paths clean. "Tom's wife must've stayed on," said Allie Dean.

They hitched the horse and went up to the side porch. The dog was nowhere in sight, but the cat rose to twine round them in affectionate recognition. "Look, Mom, at old Four-paws—he knows me," cried Lucy, fondling the soft gray fur.

Allie Dean pressed on. The dining room was immaculate, fairly stiff with order and cleanliness. Strange—they couldn't have known she was coming. Tom's wife must have—— But from the kitchen came, not Cora Bowers, but Berta; Berta with a big handkerchief tied round her head, Berta with no shoes, Berta in disreputable calico, Berta with a scrubbing brush in her hand and a pail behind her, Berta ducking and smiling disarming welcoming smiles at these two grand ladies whom she did not know.

"Where's my son—and where's Maria?" asked Allie Dean, with no smile in response.

"Oh, you are Missis Din—oh, Missis Din——" Berta

was confused and incoherent by this sudden appearance of one whom she had learned to dread as a witch and an evil woman. But Lucy had come in now and her blonde gentleness was reassuring. "Oh, and this is Missis Lucy—oh, ladies, kind ladies, Mister Din he is out somewheres at work and Mareea is in the garden for veg'tables——"

"Where's the baby?" asked Lucy. "I want to see that baby."

"Mareea has the baby with her, to be sure, Missis Lucy! Such a boy, a pudding, a plum, a little fat rooster."

"She's got the baby out with her in this hot sun——" Lucy and her mother looked their horror. They waited to hear nothing more from Berta, but went straight through the kitchen, out of the back door, and down toward the garden, Allie Dean in the lead, Lucy trailing close behind. "A month-old baby outdoors on a day like this——"

"But he has been out-of-doors every day since he was born," wailed Berta. She wondered if she ought to run after them—but no, there was the kitchen floor half scrubbed. And she did not feel equal to coping further with such fine ladies, such cross, sharp-eyed ladies with voices like knives—that is, the old one, the witch. The young one was better. Somehow, Berta did not feel such fear as she had expected at the sight of the witch. She looked cross, and mean, but she was surely too finely dressed to be a witch. She shook her head and went at the floor powerfully. It must be entirely scrubbed before they came back, and after that she would set

about baking peach cake for their dinner. A clean house and a peach cake should placate that cross momma of beautiful, wonderful Mister Din, and cause her to cease her evil magic against Mareea!

Allie Dean saw a bundle of clothes on a blanket under a tangle of bean vines. She stooped and had her first sight of her grandchild. There was not much to be seen —a tiny plump hand and a reddish face puckered in deep infantile sleep—but she gasped at the likeness, the indisputable, almost ridiculous likeness! The years turned back, dissolved, and she was gazing at the child's father, her first-born, her little son Wesley, as he lay asleep beside her in the great four-post bed where he was born, and she leaned above him and doted on him. She dropped down on her knees beside this new little Wesley and picked him up hungrily; his eyes flew open and he yelled.

"Oh, Mom, isn't he too cunning—look how *big* he is! Isn't he *lovely!*" Lucy exclaimed, and added, "Mercy, how he *cries!*"

Mareea came running from a remote corner where she was at work. She was all alarm, but relaxed at sight of the newcomers. "Oh, hello—it's you! And did you find the baby? Ain't he a big boy—ain't he grand? Can't he holler though?" She stretched her arms for him. "I expec' he's hungry."

But Allie Dean did not want to let him go. "That's not a hungry cry. That's just plain mad because I waked him up. What in the world did you leave him on the ground like that for? There's no telling what might

've got at him! There, there, lovey, hush, hush, nobody's going to hurt a baby."

She had not meant to like the child, she had not meant to touch him, but here she was, holding him jealously, already loving him, already feeling him her own. He was so little and squirmy and helpless, and so indignant at being roused. And so like his father, her son—so amazingly, appealingly like him.

"How are you, Maria?" asked Lucy, preserving the amenities. "I've been trying and trying to get over before, but there's been such a lot to do. The baby's sweet!"

Mareea had felt no slight in her sister-in-law's absence. Indeed, she liked her the better for not having seen her. She felt amiable toward everyone, even toward Allie Dean. What could trouble a woman with a baby like young Wesley? She beamed at Lucy.

"Ain't he a sweet baby! An' so good 'cept when he holler like this."

Allie Dean was walking off toward the house with him. "This child mustn't stay out in this sun and heat," she said. "It's terrible for him."

Lucy looked after her helplessly. "You come on in, too," she coaxed. "It can't be good for you to be out here, either."

"Aw ri'," agreed Mareea. "I'm all finish clearin' up, anyway. Don' my garden look good, Lucy? An' the flowers—you see the flowers?"

"Yes, everything looks fine." Lucy had never found much to talk about with Mareea, and now she was more

at a loss than ever. Mareea, for her part, thought Lucy a dull girl, fairly pretty to look at, but without spirit, and therefore not worth much consideration. But Lucy had called the baby "sweet," so to-day Mareea found it easy to be amiable to her.

"How's your new husband, that Bob?" she asked agreeably. "An' how's your housekeeping comin'? Ain't you goin' to have a baby yourself pretty soon?"

Lucy blushed fierily. "My soul!" she gasped. "Don't you know people can't go around talking about such things out loud!"

"How do they talk? Whispers, I guess. Well, aw ri' if you don' want to tell me. I only ask because I think if you was, you'd be please." But she saw that Lucy was offended. "I didn' mean to make you mad. I don' know why you are mad."

"I'm not mad—only—only—I do like- -some *manners!*"

They were at the kitchen door, so Mareea shrugged and did not answer. Manners! That was funny! Allie Dean walked in ahead of them holding the baby with the effect of a procession. Berta had finished her scrubbing and stood back to let her pass. She winked and beckoned to Mareea. "I better make a peach cake, you know, with cracked kernels and spice."

Mareea nodded. "Anything—I don' care." She saw that Berta was doing homage, propitiating the demi-goddesses.

In the dining room Allie Dean paused. "Where's his cradle?" she asked. "Didn't Wes' bring down the cradle

from the garret? Have you got it up in your room?"

"Oh, no—he don' need no cradle. He sleep in bed with me, he sleep anywhere—the chair, the floor, the lounge —anywhere I put him down, he sleep, a good baby."

Allie Dean and Lucy again rolled eyes of horror toward each other. "About time I got home," said Allie Dean. "Why, I left everything ready in that cradle; little pillow cases and sheets and quilt and blanket and spread. Didn't need a thing but an airing. I wonder Aunt Dula didn't hunt 'em out for you."

"Who?"

"Aunt Dula Wheeler, the coloured woman nurse."

"Oh, I sent her off the day after the baby came. I didn't want her with Berta. Berta is fine with babies."

As the extent of this irregularity and departure from custom revealed itself to Allie Dean she was more and more annoyed. "Why didn't Wes' tell me! I'd 've come right on home and seen that everything was right and fitting. I don't like this ragtag-and-bobtail way of doing things *at all !* When Wes' comes in for dinner he can bring that cradle down and I'll rinse out the clothes and press 'em off and get this child fixed like he ought to be."

Mareea was puzzled. It was tiresome having the old woman back acting as if she owned everything. There had been no fussing, no clash of wills while she was alone with Wes' and the baby, and Berta serving them with familiar devotion. She had enjoyed the interval of serenity, she would prefer that it continue. But she couldn't expect it with Allie Dean. Peace or no peace,

better make it plain to the old black crow from the first that she must not put on so many airs, particularly about the baby.

"The child is well, he is strong," said Mareea contentiously. "He don' need no cradle."

Lucy tried to divert the impending clash. "But it'll be lots more convenient if he has a nice little bed of his own, and he'll look so cute in it! What's his name—have you named him yet?"

"His name is Wes', like his father, to be sure. What else would it be?"

"Has he been christened?" asked Allie Dean. She could not stop gazing at the infant. His blue eyes, now wide and round, made the resemblance to Wesley the elder still more true. He had stopped his crying and was quiet, only moving himself with those aimless hand-wavings and kicks and wags of the head with which a tiny child begins to make his muscles.

"No, Berta wanted a priest, but we were busy an' I don' know the priest here."

Allie Dean stiffened at the word "priest," but the child chose the moment to kick strongly, to screw up his features for more wails.

"He is hungry again, he is always hungry," said Mareea, and advancing, took him away from Allie Dean, sat down, and opened her dress and began to nurse him.

Lucy thought it was disgusting. No modesty, no idea of ladylike behaviour. Neither did Allie Dean like the sight. She turned Mareea's apron lightly up and

over the abomination of an infant human being fed in the only way suitable to its needs. "That'll keep the drafts off," she said. "He might catch cold."

Mareea was not taken in by this subterfuge. She tossed the apron down again and confronted Mrs. Dean and Lucy with a defiant stare.

"This baby is mine," she said. "I know what is right for him."

Chapter Sixteen

THE dinner Berta cooked for the fine cross ladies was her best. They had never before tasted green beans in sour cream, or ham slowly browned in the pan with mustard and sugar, or peach cake with cinnamon and the pungent bitter-almond kernels of the fruit, but they found all of these things quite edible, though Allie Dean partook of them with the air of tasting poison in each morsel. Lucy would have liked to ask for the recipes, but her mother's manner made it impossible. Mrs. Dean was there to disapprove, to deplore, to suspect, and most of all, to change. Since the baby was healthy, the house as clean and neat as she had left it, and the dinner excellent, she could find no legitimate grievance. When she went to her room to throw from it all trace of Berta's occupancy, she discovered that Berta had never entered it save to clean it. The old woman slept in a little half-furnished room at the end of the hall, a sort of storeroom with a cot in it. Allie Dean's sanctum was unsullied, so another cause for conflict vanished.

When Wesley came in his mother looked hopefully to discover some trace of discontent or unhappiness or neglect, but never had he seemed so well, never had his spirits been so high.

"Why, Bud," exclaimed Lucy, kissing him, "you're putting on flesh!"

He was glad to see them, and told them so a dozen times, and Allie Dean divined that he had forgiven her going away at the time the child was born, that it did not matter to him, that he had put her down merely as old and crotchety. She did not want to have the act which signified so much to her made unimportant, minimized. Yet there seemed no way to say so, or make him feel it. He was full of talk, expansive, very much more the master of his own house than he had ever been —Berta's deference had helped in that! The crops were unusually good, the cattle in fine shape, the field hands were working better than usual; he'd found a new and more satisfactory commission man in Baltimore. But these things were as nothing beside his wife and son. That boy! "Did you ever see a finer boy, Mom?" he asked. "Such a size and so much sense—you needn't grin, Lucy, he has got sense and shows it, even if he has hardly got his eyes open yet."

"He's got one grand strong voice," teased Lucy. "You don't miss hearing him when he tunes up, I'll say that for him."

"You're just jealous because you know you and Bob'll never have a baby to compare with this one——"

"Bud—shut up—you're terrible!" (Still it was not so offensive as from Mareea.)

"Well, I want to tell you this child's a remarkable child. Isn't he, Mom? Don't you think so? Looks like me, too!"

"If you're not stuck on yourself!"

"He does look like me—don't he, honey?"

Mareea, thus appealed to, smiled, her antagonism to Allie Dean suppressed and postponed. The baby had gone off to sleep after his nursing, had been put down on the lounge and lay there slumbering, undisturbed by the noise. "Yeah, he looks like you, Wes'! If he had look like me, I would not love him so much." Her gaze at her husband was openly and shamelessly adoring. And he returned it.

"There you see, Sis. Somebody around here thinks I'm all right, anyway."

Lucy was enjoying herself. It was like old times to sit here and joke with Bud. She was relieved and glad that everything was in order and the baby so nice. The strange dinner interested her. Even old Berta was bearable, an oddity certainly, but a useful, good sort of oddity. She would have a big story to tell Bob when she went home. And thank heaven they would be alone together and she could tell it to him without her mother as continual check and damper. She glanced at her mother questioningly. Why couldn't she be more agreeable? She ought to be relieved and glad, too, that all was so well with Wesley and his household. But instead she was looking like a martyr. For the second time in her life Lucy's unquestioning loyalty to her mother wavered. Then she rebuked herself. All very well for her, who would presently drive away to her own home and her own husband and her own ways and belongings, but far harder for her mother who must stay and play second

fiddle in a house where she had so long been first. "But what can I do about it?" thought Lucy, knowing perfectly that she had scarcely courage to attack a difficult situation in her own interest, let alone in the interest of another. "She'll feel better when she gets used to it," she told herself, mentally pushing the whole thing away from her.

"Mom, you think the baby looks like me, don't you?"

Wesley spoke directly to his mother, and her shadowed face lightened a little in reply. "Yes, he's the very spit and image of you when you were that age, Wesley—but I think he'll weigh a little heavier. I only hope he'll grow up a good upright man, like his father and grandfather." Then she remembered the cradle. "Maria don't seem to think he needs it, but she'll find it real handy once it's downstairs. You go up attic and fetch it when you're done eating. You can have it right in here." She indicated a spot near the hearth. "I always had it here for you and Lucy."

Mareea said nothing, but she looked sulky. The bossy, pig-headed old woman! Still—the cradle—if her Wes' slept in it when he was a baby, it was nice that his son should also sleep in it. If only the old woman did not think she gave in because she was willing to be bossed.

"Say, that'll be slick, having the cradle!" cried Wes'. "I can remember you rocking Lucy in it, Mom, and wasn't she a squalling little brat, though?—voice like a tin whistle."

"You needn't say anything about me, the way your baby cries! He's louder than I ever was."

"You didn't hear yourself. You used to scare the chickens down around the barn! You'd lay there and kick up your feet and howl till you were blue in the face! Say, Mareea, honey, you never seen that old cradle. You're going to like it."

"If you like it, I like it," said Mareea, accepting the cradle from that moment.

"Soon's I've et another piece peach cake I'll go on up and fetch it. Ain't this peach cake good, Mom? Berta's a rip-snorting cook; makes everything taste uncommon."

"I don't know that's any compliment," said Allie Dean unpleasantly. "I never knew you to refuse what you was brought up on, and you always had plenty of good wholesome food, that tasted right, even if it wasn't flavoured so strong."

Berta had not sat down with them, but she was listening in the kitchen, and at Wesley's praise her face appeared at the door in a wide wrinkled grin. The grin disappeared at Allie Dean's reply. "There are so many grand things in this house to cook with," Berta ventured to say. "Meats an' fruits, weg'tables, butter, eggs, cream —anybody would love to cook here."

"I expect you like to cook for Bud because he eats such a lot," said Lucy, to smooth over the moment.

"A man should eat hearty," said old Berta seriously. "But of course I do not cook as you fine ladies are used to eatin'."

Such humility did not please Mareea. "You cook in your own way the very best. Nobody is too fine to eat your cookin', I tell you."

Allie Dean gave her daughter-in-law a black glance, but turned to Wesley. "If you intend to do any work before sundown you'd better go up for the cradle and get started along."

"All right, I'm going, this minute."

Lucy braved her mother's displeasure. "I'm going out in the kitchen and ask her how she fixed these potatoes. I'll bet Bob would like 'em. She wouldn't mind telling me, would she, Maria?"

"She be tickle' to death. Hey, Berta—Lucy wants to know what makes your dinner so good."

Berta's grin came back, wider than before. "I'd like to know what you put in these potatoes," said Lucy. "I never tasted anything like 'em."

"Little piece side-meat, fry it slow, slow, till it go crik-crik—chop it very small, thass all. Jus' stir it in."

"And you put sour cream in the beans—how much?"

"Not very much—couple spoon, maybe, You mus' taste an' taste, an' put in plenty pepper, too."

Berta had begun to carry out the dishes, and Lucy and Mareea helped her while they talked. Allie Dean sat beside the lounge, watching the sleeping child. The more she looked at him, the more she yearned to him. She wished she could pick him up and hold him tight and drive those two chattering, common foreigners out and away, never to return. She was surprised at the strength of her feeling. "I don't know what's come over me," she thought. "I'd give anything to keep this child all to myself and bring him up like he ought to be. Must be because he looks so like Bud." She leaned over him

and tucked his fist under the light cover, for an excuse to touch him. As she did this, he puckered his under lip and sucked it in, and she pretended to think he was going to wake. "There, there, there, my lovey," she murmured. "Just a little and you'll have a nice comfortable place to sleep. Your grandma'll fix your cradle, indeed she will. Nobody knows what's good for you but your grandma." It was the first time she had thought of herself as a grandmother, and she whispered the word relishingly. It brought the child nearer to her heart, gave her a greater claim on him, to call herself his grandmother.

Lucy quietly touched Mareea's arm and nodded toward the two. "Mother's so delighted with the baby," she said in an undertone. She thought it would make for peace, but Mareea was disturbed, drew her straight black brows together in a lowering frown. She didn't want the old woman to be delighted with the child—she could see the stark possessiveness in the way she leaned, the hand she stretched above him. Mareea was possessive, too, and greedy of her son.

Now they could hear Wesley bumping downstairs with the cradle. "It's the heaviest old thing!" he panted. "Why'd you have it stuck so far back under the eaves? I run my hand in to get a good holt and jabbed my knuckle on a long shingle nail or something—I hope the blood didn't drop down on the bedclo'es."

"I hope not, indeed," said Allie Dean, getting up briskly. "Here, I'll take it, I can drag it. Go and do something for your knuckle. Let me see—oh, that's not

a bad cut. Go on to the sink and wash it off and I'll get a rag to tie round it."

She pulled the cradle over by the hearth, picked up the pile of small quilts and sheets. "I don't believe these need to be washed again. I'll let 'em stay out in the sun all afternoon to air and sweeten, and I can make up the little fellow's bed before supper."

Now that the cradle was actually in sight, Mareea could not help but like it. A solid old thing with a hood, all of polished cherry, there was a droll babyish suggestion about its shape, and the sheets, the knitted coverlet, and patchwork quilts were replicas in miniature of adult old-fashioned bedding. There was a star quilt and one in basket pattern, and one all white which Allie Dean unfolded with special care was a mass of the most intricate and beautiful quilting, a masterpiece of skill and patience.

"Say, but they're cute. Baby'll look cute in that," said Mareea. "Hey, little dumplin', look at your new bed."

But the youngest Dean had not reached the age when the gauds and vanities of the world could rouse him from slumber. Allie Dean took charge of the bedding, importantly shaking it out, commenting on tiny stray defects. "If there's a lemon in the house I'll put a drop of juice on this rust spot and rub in some salt and lay it in the sun and it'll be gone in an hour."

Wes' came back. "My finger's stopped bleeding. It don't need tying up. A rag'd be in my way."

"You better have one—if you wait a second I'd make

you a finger stall." But she really did not want to stop playing with the cradle things.

"My gosh, you'd think I'd cut my hand off or something! I'm all right. S'long—see you later."

"You won't see me later, Bud. I'm going home before supper," Lucy said.

"You better wait till after. It's hot as blazes. I s'pose you dassent trust that husband of yours to get himself a meal all soul alone. Pity you didn't leave him some cold vittles to munch on."

"You think you're so awful funny!" Lucy kissed him good-bye, gave him a little fond, exasperated shake. "You and Mareea drive over real soon and bring the baby. How about next Sunday?"

"Maybe we will if I can argue Mareea outa the garden. She's growing garden sass right along up till snowfall."

"She don't work in the garden of a Sunday!"

"She cert'n'y does. Better the day better the deed to Mareea."

"Oh, Bud, don't let her! People'd talk worse'n ever if they found out. It'd be a nine days' wonder!"

"Hafta find some other word than 'let' for Mareea. She's a strong-minded female. She henpecks me terrible."

He waved his hand and was gone. "He was only joking, wasn't he, Maria, about you working of a Sunday?"

"He's a big joker," answered Mareea smoothly.

Behind Lucy's back she winked at Berta. She wanted Berta to see what a fool Lucy was.

"Well, now," said Allie Dean, coming back from spreading the bedclothes on the hedge. "We can sit on the porch and sew and have a dish of discourse. I want to hear all about the baby, Maria." It was almost the first direct word she had spoken to Mareea, but the cradle episode had lightened her gloom.

"Haven't learned my name is Mareea yet, have you? I don' know about sittin' down. I ought to finish pullin' up the onions. Berta'll talk to you. Berta likes talk most as well as cake and candy."

"Oh, now, stay for a while," begged Lucy. "I haven't seen you for a coon's age."

"But that is not my fault."

"I know I should 've come over before, but with a new house——"

"An' such a new husband——"

"Well, I do have a lot to do. But I'm coming again soon. You ought to have a christening party—how about that? Don't you want me and Bob to be his godfather and godmother? My sakes, that reminds me!" She produced the two silver dollars. "That's to start the baby a bank account. Bob thought of it himself."

Mareea was conciliated by this attention. "Now thass pretty nice of you an' Bob, thass pretty nice. Lookahere, Berta, money for the baby—great big silver money for the little dumplin'. He's a rich baby now, a real rich baby."

"He'll be a rich man," prophesied Berta, who had joined the porch group timidly, perching on the edge of the steps. "Thass a boy born for luck an' riches. I seen it soon as he was born an' begun to holler so loud. Only rich people darst lift up their voices so loud these days. He knows he's goin' to be rich, an' here he's got silver money an' not two months ol'. Lucky!"

Allie Dean did not like this talk of luck. "'Lay not up for yourselves riches on earth,'" she quoted austerely, "'where moth and rust do corrupt and thieves break through and steal!'"

She and Lucy had brought out their fancywork; Lucy a length of fine crochet insertion, her mother a chemise yoke with a pattern of round eyelets. She stabbed the holes accurately and sharply with her small stiletto, her hands seemed to find pleasure in breaking the white muslin. Berta worked at nothing, and Mareea, too, sat with idle hands clasped round her knees. The sun was so bright that the shade of the maples was almost black, and there was just enough air stirring to keep the heat from becoming overpowering. Nicky, the dog, lay flat, stifled in his fur, without energy to snap at the flies buzzing about him. The cat had sought some secret cool location of his own.

Beyond the lane and the trees the wide peaceful fields lay quiescent in the sun, absorbing strength and fertility for the coming winter and the growth of spring beyond. The sun gave them life, and they gave back life to the sun, under the release of the hand of man. At the horizon's limit was the pine wood, a soft green-black line of

shadow to mark where man's toil ended and Nature's began. It was all so quiet, so assuredly serene—it seemed as though nothing of tragedy, nothing of unrest or sorrow, nothing of pain could ever enter here.

The four women on the porch felt this quiet, this serenity, and pitched their voices low to be part of it. They made a strange contrast—the two alien, the two native women—Allie Dean straight, neat, and coldly precise; Lucy fair and gentle but without strength, Berta a bent and gnarled figure for a Nuremberg nut-cracker, and Mareea dark and brilliant and blooming and vital even now as she leaned and took her ease. Her faded brown calico dress melted into her sweet brown flesh. Allie Dean looked at her furtively and looked away. The girl's warm sensuousness, her round arms and waist and breasts seemed to the older woman vulgar, gross, animal. And Berta—how soon would she be able to get her out of the house? She wasn't going to stay here with a curio like Berta underfoot all the time, cooking strange messes on her good kitchen range, wearing a cloth over her head like a darky. Moreover, Berta was Mareea's ally.

While these thoughts filled her mind she went on talking with Lucy, aimless neighbourhood gossip to which the others could add nothing. But presently the baby woke and had to be taken up and nursed again, and this small activity focussed every thought on him. Full fed, he lay across his mother's knees and blinked at this world where everyone was concerned with him, where his wants and needs were catered to as soon as he made

them known, where every detail of his person was of supreme importance.

"He weighs twelve pounds if he weighs an ounce," said Allie Dean. "Let me heft him, Maria, I'm good at telling weights." This was her excuse to get him in her arms again. "Yes, he's easy twelve pounds!"

"He grow, grow, every minute since he's born!" declared Mareea proudly.

But young Wesley, after having his weight tested, became aware that his mother had let him go, whereupon he set up his loud yell and continued until Mareea took him again, hushing him, patting him into quiet. "He wants me. He knows who's got him." She enjoyed Allie Dean's discomfiture.

"I must think about starting on home," said Lucy, the conciliator. "I guess the horse is pretty well rested by this time."

Then Berta must go to the kitchen and bring out fresh coffee and slices of the peach cake, and there was the little festivity of eating and drinking together, though Allie Dean hated it. "That old scarecrow acts like it was her own house," she thought, and she looked her disgust plainly when Berta drank her coffee with loud, hearty sups.

Lucy clung to her mother at parting, dumbly expressing her contrition for having forced her away. "Come back to me soon's you can," she begged, but Allie Dean knew she did not mean it.

"She's ashamed of herself, but she's glad enough that I'm gone," thought her mother, and with truth. She

covered her knowledge from her daughter with a forced smile, and calculated words. "Oh, I'll be there before long. Don't you and Bob forget to drive over here real soon."

When Lucy was actually on her way the evening duties of the farm were waiting, supper to be cooked, the fowls to be fed and the eggs brought in, milk pails to be set out for the men, and place to be made in the spring house for the new milk. Berta and Mareea went at these competently, and Allie Dean did not try to take part, for she wanted to arrange the cradle and put the baby into it. He was asleep again, with both arms thrown high, like a cherubim prepared for flight. Mareea laid him on the lounge and went off to the chicken yard, so that Allie Dean had her chance at him undisturbed. When at last she eased him down into the cradle and he lay there, as Wesley had done, she had again that strange fierce pang of possession.

"Grandma'll take care of you, little boy," she said to him. "Grandma'll take care of her little lovey-boy." She was full of a sharp burning happiness. Wesley had escaped from her love and her authority, when he turned to Mareea, and Lucy, too, had escaped her. But here was another child who for years might be close to her heart, wax in her hands. She could sew for him—how glad she was that Mareea could not sew!—she could teach him his Bible lessons, take him to Sunday school, and line by line, precept by precept, make him all Dean with no trace of his mother. No queer ways and wild manners for little Wesley Dean, her grandson. She had something to

do now. His likeness to his father was a sign from heaven that he must be saved from Mareea. And oh, if she could make Mareea's child alien to her, as Mareea had made *her* child alien to his mother, how full, how fine, how pre-ordained a revenge it would be!

When Wesley came in the house for supper he complained about his hurt knuckle.

"Plague-taked thing's kind of sore—guess I better put some liniment on it."

On the shelf in the cupboard sat the time-honoured bottle of liniment along with the camphor, the borax, the pills and pellets for home-doctoring. The pungent odour filled the room when he poured the lotion over the little jagged cut, and Wesley said, "Ouch, smarts like the dickens," and his mother replied, "That's what takes the soreness out," as she had always done at such moments.

After supper Mareea and Wesley went out on the porch and sat in the twilight, talking about the farm and the work and the baby. Mareea told him about Lucy's gift and Wesley was pleased. "Wonder where my little old iron bank is I used to keep my pennies in," he said. "It was made like a house and painted yellow. I don't believe the slot's big enough for a dollar—I never had anything bigger'n a dime—but I'd like the little fella to have it. Get Mom to hunt it up to-morrow."

"I'll hunt it. I c'n find it."

She told him there had been a man at the house that morning asking to buy potatoes.

"But I say he don' pay enough."

Wesley laughed. "That's right, you speak up to 'em. I'll hafta let you tackle old man Perry about that land. He come over to the field where I was this aft'noon and begun dickering again. I know he'd like to sell, but he can't make up his mind to take a fair price, so we didn't get anywhere. He thinks I want it so bad he can gouge me."

"The ol' beast!"

"There you go, honey—you mustn't call names like that. Old man Perry's all right—it's just his human nature cropping out in him. Buy low, sell high—that's what ever'body's aiming at."

"Oh, Wes', you're a good man." She leaned her head against his shoulder, hugged him. "Wes', you the bes' man in the world. Wes', I'm awful glad I'm marry with you."

"You're not any gladder'n I am."

"Say, listen, there goes the baby again. 'Bout time I nursed him an' took him up to bed."

Wesley turned his head and looked into the lamp-lit dining room. "Mom's picking him up out of the cradle."

"He won't stop hollerin' for her. He want his mother."

"He's smart, that boy. Won't it be fine when he's big enough to talk and run around and play? My gosh, seems like I got more'n my share, when I look at you and him both. Well, I'm sleepy. Soon's I've been down to lock up let's all go to bed. It's cooled off nice—'twon't be so bad for sleeping as it was last night."

Chapter Seventeen

EARLY, early in the gray dawn Mareea came slowly from deep and dreamless slumber to find Wes' stirring uncomfortably beside her. "My finger aches me terrible, hon," he explained. "It's all swelled. I'm going down and put some more liniment on it."

She was instantly awake. "Say, thass bad. I'll bring the liniment for you."

"No, I'll go down."

"I light you the lamp."

"No, I don't need it. It's pret' near daylight. Don't you get up. Gosh, that finger hurts like a bone felon!"

But she must follow him. As they tiptoed into the hall his mother waked. "What's the matter? That you, Wes'?"

"Don't get scared, Mom. My finger's all puffed up and hurting and we're going downstairs to get some more liniment."

Allie Dean slipped a wrapper over her nightgown, lit her lamp, and hurried after them. She ignored Mareea. "Was that nail you tore it on rusty? You'd ought to've had a piece of bacon rind bound over it. Here, let me look."

Mareea had the liniment bottle ready to pour. Wesley held the wrist of the hurt hand with the other, and his

face was drawn. "It cert'n'y does hurt—kind of throbs," he said.

Allie Dean took command. "Douse it good with the liniment—don't let the bottle hit the place—be careful! Don't that ease it any, Son?"

"I can't tell if it's my hand hurting or the liniment smarting."

"Oh, Wes'," said Mareea, "I light up the fire, I get some hot water to draw the sore out."

"Don't do that, that's no good," said Allie Dean from the pantry. She was rummaging there for bacon rind and an old towel. Now she came out with them. "Did you say the nail was rusty? I'm always so scared about a rusty nail—they'll give you lockjaw."

"You trying to cheer me up, Mom?" Wesley managed a pale smile. "I don't know if the nail was rusty or not."

"You'd ought to've looked. Hold out your hand—there, I'll lay the bacon rind right on the place. Steady till I get this towel tore into strips. My, that is puffed up."

"I don' believe that greasy stuff is right," said Mareea watching, frantic. "Thass about as much good as Berta hangin' up a bunch o' weeds!"

"You don't know a thing about it," said Mrs. Dean. "Bacon rind's a sure cure for a jag by a rusty nail."

"I think I'll lay down here in the dining room on the lounge," said Wesley. "Maybe catch a nap, and won't disturb you, Mareea."

"That's right," said his mother. "The pain'll ease off pretty soon."

"If it don't, you come call me?" begged Mareea anxiously.

She went upstairs reluctantly, and Allie Dean followed her. They were both worried, but their mutual distrust kept them from speaking. "That greasy stuff will do him no good, I know it," thought Mareea. And, "She wants to gainsay and belittle everything I do for Bud—as if she knew the first thing about what's needed." That was in Allie Dean's mind.

But at half-past five when Berta came down to start the fire and begin breakfast, the lounge was empty, and a little later, when Mareea and Allie Dean appeared, Wesley came in from the barn, worn and haggard with pain. "I can't eat," he said. "I been down to tell Tom Bowers to hitch up and drive me in town to see Doc George. The swelling's gone halfway up my arm, and it makes me sick all over."

"I knew that bacon rind was no good," cried Mareea. "I'm goin' with you, Wes'. You drink a cup of coffee, and I get my hat—no, I don' want no hat."

"If you go traipsing around and get all fevered up it'll be bad for the baby," said Allie Dean. "You stay here and I'll ride in with him."

"I don't want neither one of you to go. Tom Bowers is going with me. Here, help me unbutton my shirt sleeve, Mareea; the swelling makes it tight."

Mareea clung to him. "My dear, my darlin'—Mareea can' let you go off all sick with nobody but Tom Bowers——"

"Don't take on so—it's nothing much, only it hurts

like Tophet. Doc'll fix me up in no time." He was impatient, unaccustomed to pain or sickness.

Tom Bowers drove the buggy round, and he went out. "I'll be back right away," he said. "Now, don't take on, Mareea." But he stopped and kissed her twice as she followed him, holding to his unhurt hand.

She dropped down on the side porch and watched them ride away. "He's ve–ry sick," she said sombrely. "He was sick in his eyes." She looked accusingly at his mother, and Allie Dean knew she was reproaching her for the useless bacon rind.

"It's no sense to get all upset," said Allie Dean, refusing to be reproached. "Dr. George'll fix him up—he's the best doctor on the Shore, everybody says so. We'd better clip round and get the work done, st'd o' holding our hands and bemoaning what we can't help."

Berta also, more kindly, coaxingly, "No need for you to worry, Mareea. I had a swole-up arm one time, big's a bucket, an' it all come right. Eat your vittles, take care of little dumplin'—ever'thing'll be hunky."

"Yes, there's no use running to meet trouble," added Allie Dean self-righteously. "We got plenty of it without that."

"Oh, shut up, you both!" cried Mareea. "Somethin' tells me my Wes' is bad sick. An' me not with him! My Wes'!"

So they left her alone. Berta brought her the baby, and with him in her arms she sat and watched the gate. For an hour and a half she waited before the buggy came in sight. She ran to meet it. Wesley had collapsed

on Tom Bowers's shoulder and was supported by him.

"Doc was outa town, been down in the Neck all night where the fever's at," reported Tom. "We waited a while, but Wes' got so bad off I was scared, so I sent out a coupla fellows on horseback to find Doc and bring him along soon's they could. Now, Wes', let me kinda lift you out—you got to get to bed quick's we can manage it. Doc'll be here before long. I know it."

Allie Dean and Berta came hurrying to them, and together they managed to half lead, half carry Wesley Dean into his house and up his stairs and lay him on his bed. He groaned in agony, his eyes were shut, he seemed but half conscious. Mareea did not cry or flinch. Only now and then she said, as if to herself, "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"He's got to have a strong drawing poultice," said Allie Dean. "Bread and milk—or flaxseed——"

"No," said Mareea, "no more messes of yours. A big kittle hot, hot water——"

"Yes, thass it," cried Berta. "I bring—wait but a second." She trotted away breathlessly and brought up the dishpan filled with steaming water. "I put some more on the stove," she panted. "I'll dip this out an' put in more hot allatime."

They cut open his sleeve and lowered the swollen, red-streaked hand and arm into it. He cried out suddenly and shrilly in a strange voice at the new pain, the pain of the heat, but Berta held his arm with hard, tender fingers. After that she toiled up and down with more water, dipping out the cool carefully, not to spill

it, pouring in the hot with little encouraging chirrups and chuts. As the heat of the morning increased the sweat poured off Wesley in streams, but he opened his eyes and said faintly that the pain seemed not so great. Allie Dean helped Berta, but Mareea stayed beside her husband, wiping his face, holding cool water for him to drink, only leaving him when she must tend young Wes'. She hardly spoke, she never took her eyes from him. Downstairs Tom Bowers hovered about anxiously, watching for the doctor.

But he did not come until afternoon. An old man, stout and sagging, worn now from an all-night vigil and a long ride, he could hardly keep his puffy eyelids from sliding down over his tired, dull eyes. But he was competent. And he did not minimize the danger.

"This is pretty bad. I'll stay here. I'll do what I can," he said.

"I'm in a pretty bad way, Doc," groaned Wesley.

"Yes, you're in a bad way." The husky old voice carried an implication that was ice in that steaming room. It made Wes' forget his pain.

"Doc—you don't mean—a little thing like this—ain't I got a chance, Doc?"

The three women bent closer to hear the answer, impaled on its significance. The doctor had said he was going to stay—that was at once a warning and a reassurance. But now . . .

The answer came after a little pause. "Yes, you got a chance, Wes'."

Wesley Dean was a brave man. He looked up at the doctor and the doctor looked down at him, steadily. "It's as bad as that?"

"Yes, it's as bad as that. I'm going to do all I can for you."

Mareea put her hand over her mouth to keep back screams. She caught the ominous doubt in the doctor's words. Wes' caught it, too, and Allie Dean, and the gnarled old Bohemian woman whose face worked and grimaced to smile reassuringly.

And through Allie Dean's mind went a quick baseness. If Wes' died, she, his mother, would have whip hand here once more. Mareea wouldn't know her rights —she could pay her something, push her out, yes, drive her out—and hold the boy. All that she had choked down during this long goading year of Wes's marriage rose and danced, fantastic in her thoughts, indicating that at last the hour had struck for reprisal better than she had ever dreamed of. She felt securely, wickedly capable of anything. She felt her wickedness possess her utterly, endow her with strength. She moved her hands with wicked, restless power, she looked at her son and his wife, as if he were already dead, and the girl, Mareea, already driven out. She was alone, supreme.

It went out from her, it made itself felt in the room, her wickedness. She knew they were all gazing at her curiously, even the doctor, and she muttered something and went into her own room to get away from their eyes. But the evil that was in her heart had spread

through the room, had reached her son, made him curiously apprehensive. It warned him to protect Mareea against his mother.

He spoke words that shaped themselves without his aid. "Doc, if there's any danger, I got to make my will. I never've made any will."

The dry, husky voice of the doctor replied cunningly, "That's a good idea. My experience is that folks who make their will always get well mighty quick."

An anguished shudder went through Wesley Dean, but he commanded himself for Mareea's helplessness. "Get me a piece of paper and a pen," he said. "Tell Tom Bowers to come up for a witness."

Allie Dean, in her own room, did not hear him. She had shut the door to shut in her wickedness with her, to keep it to herself, unbetrayed. She was there when Tom Bowers tiptoed up the stairs behind Berta, she was there when the doctor lifted and held Wes' as he wrote and signed his name. But she saw and heard none of it.

"I leave all the property I die possessed of to my wife, Maria Dean.

"Signed, WESLEY DEAN."

He could manage no more. But he watched while the doctor and Tom Bowers signed as witnesses, and then he looked toward Berta. "Give it to her—she'll take care of it," he whispered.

Forty-eight hours later Wesley Dean died. He died at

the moment when a year before he had first seen Mareea. In the most agonized convulsion that racked his body he did not unclasp his hand from hers. The last sight his glazing eyes beheld was her face, very near his and quiet and calm with all her will, to comfort and sustain him. "My honey——" he whispered. They were his last words.

Not until the doctor loosed her hand from his, not until he had gently pushed her away from the bed would she believe that he was dead. And then she lifted up her arms and voice and gave one long shrill cry of desolation. Outside Nicky howled an answer, a death wail for his master.

"Get her away," said the doctor to Berta. He put a powder in a glass and poured water on it. "Make her drink this—it'll quiet her."

Then he went downstairs heavily, for he had had little rest for four nights. Allie Dean was in the dining room with the baby, and Lucy was sitting beside her crying. She had been sent for the day before. "I did everything I could," said the doctor. "God knows I wish it had been more. But if I'd cut off his arm 'twouldn't have saved him—I knew it the minute I looked at him. He was a fine boy, Mrs. Dean. Long as I've been practising I can't get used to having the young leave us. When a man's old and has lived out his life—yes. But a strong young fellow with a wife and child and everything before him—it's not right. I never can feel it's right."

Allie Dean followed him to the door. She was like granite, gray, flinty. Her face was set in sharp, controlled

lines, her voice sounded far away. But her words were commonplace. "What *was* it?" she asked. "That place on his finger wasn't much more'n a skin-break. He'd had lots worse cuts before and they healed right up. I can't take it in."

"A little speck of something poisonous got into the blood. Infection, they call it in the medical schools. It spreads like wildfire. If he'd had that hot-water treatment first off maybe—— Well, there's no use going into that." He turned back to say one more word. "His wife's a brave young woman. I was right pleased with her. Mrs. Dean, you've both got my heart's sympathy."

"'The Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away,'" said Allie Dean stonily. "'Blessed be the name of the Lord. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. . . .'"

But Dr. George did not wait to hear her resignation. Other patients were calling him. He lifted himself with an effort into his low phaëton and drove away. He told Tom Bowers he would send the undertaker.

As soon as he had gone Mareea went back into the room where Wes' lay so still. She cried out no more, she had no tears, she seemed as calm as Allie Dean herself. But she waited there beside the man she loved, with her head dropped down on the bed close to him. Sometimes she whispered to him, broken words, little foolish fondnesses. She stayed there until the undertaker came, and then she rose and went downstairs, walking with even, quiet steps. Berta was whimpering miserably beside the baby, for Allie Dean and Lucy were at the

dreary task of hunting out the necessary mourning clothes.

"Take the baby outa that cradle," said Mareea. "Hol' onto him a little. You got a fire in the kitchen?"

"Yes, sure—oh, Mareea, my little lady, my bird, what are you goin' to do?"

Mareea did not answer. She picked up the cradle bedding and carried it out to the kitchen. Piece by piece she stuffed it into the fire—the smell of burning feathers and cloth filled the house, the smoke was black.

Then she took the hatchet and with all her strength hewed the old cradle to splinters and gave that also to the flames. Allie Dean and Lucy came running at the sound of the smashing wood. "My soul—what you doing? Are you crazy?" cried Allie Dean.

Mareea turned on her savagely. "You would have him bring down that cradle—you would have your way! An' so he hurt his hand, his poor hand! An' so he is dead! It is because of you an' your bossy mean ways that he is dead! You killed him! You killed my Wes'——"

She dropped the hatchet and snatched her child from Berta. "I'm goin' out," she said, "out from here till I can stop wantin' to kill you, too."

When condoling friends and relatives arrived they had to be told that Wes's wife was in the garden, she wouldn't come in. And, to great local scandal, she hadn't so much as put on a black dress. "Would you believe it? —she was in her old everyday calico, pulling up beans and stackin' 'em. Had that little bit of a baby out there

with her. Yes, I saw her myself. And not a drop o' water in her eyes nor a catch in her voice! So hard! I wouldn't 've believed it. Wes' was so good to her, too. I hear he left her the farm and every cent he had. Well, poor Allie Dean! What she's been through no tongue can tell. If ever a woman deserved a starry crown, she's the one."

Chapter Eighteen

Not until Belle Lucas came, Belle with tears frankly dripping down her plump pink cheeks, with her arms open to her friend, stammering her sympathy, warm and human and practical, could Mareea be drawn from her numb solitude. "Don't go on like this," begged Belle. "Don't, Mareea—out here all day and sitting by him all night! You'll do yourself an injury, you'll get sick——"

"I wisht I was sick. I wisht I was dead with him, Belle."

"I don't blame you any. But look here, if you was, who'd take care of the baby? The baby's Wes's child as well as yours. Don't you s'pose Wes'd want you to take care of the baby, Mareea? You know he would."

"I wisht I was dead with him."

"But, Mareea, look here at your little baby. If you keep on like this you'll do something terrible to your milk and when you nurse the baby he'll get sick."

Mareea's expression changed. "Who said it? Is it true, are you sure?"

"Dr. George said so. Come on in the house and put on your black dress. You're his widow, you're not showin' him proper respect by stayin' out here."

"There are such people in the house, and so many. They stare at me, they talk to me, they won't leave me alone. They won't even leave me alone with my Wes'."

Belle cried harder than ever. "But I'll stay with you, I'll keep the people away, I'll see they don't bother you. You must do what's right, Mareea. Wes'd expect you to put on a black dress and go to his funeral and do all the right things—you know he would. He didn't like out-of-the-way acting. Come along with me. I'll stay with you. I promise you I won't go away."

Mareea began to shiver, to tremble. She pushed back her hair from her face, sharp and thin and worn from the last few days. Belle held her, still crying so that her tears were wet against Mareea's thin cheeks, against her lips. "Oh, my goodness," mourned Belle, "oh, you poor girl! Seems if I couldn't stand it myself. Not that I felt toward Wes' anything but as a good friend, but seems if I couldn't stand seeing you and that baby without him. Oh, Mareea, you poor, poor girl!"

The touch, the melting voice, the warm, compassionate tears—a great sob shook Mareea from head to foot. She leaned against Belle and began to cry terribly, ungovernably, with tears that were half words, with words that were half tears. "My Wes' . . . my Wes' . . . good . . . and kind . . . gone from me . . . gone . . . gone! What'll I do? . . . What'll I do? . . ."

The storm frightened Belle's own grief into quiet. She stood and steadied Mareea as well as she could, and finally brought her into the house and got her to bed, in collapse. She fell at once into the stupor of exhaustion,

and Belle barred the door to everyone except Berta who brought the child.

"Listen, Mees," whispered Berta, "I got the paper he give me, the paper with writing. I want you to take it an' give it to the bes' people. Don' give to Missis Din, nor Missis Lucy. It's got deep t'ings in it." She produced Wesley's will from her bosom and held it out anxiously to Belle.

"My soul, this *is* deep things! This is important! Where'd you ever find it?"

"I didn' fin' it. He give me to keep for *her*."

"I think Squire Fiske ought to have it. He tends to all the Deans' law business, I'm sure he does."

Berta watched her warily. She was not sure that she should have let the paper go from her own hands. But she did not know what to do with it. She did not like Tom Bowers, she had not seen the doctor again, and she felt herself an inadequate custodian.

"I trust you," said Berta. "You give it to the bes' people."

Now Belle had qualms. "Well, but look here—the Deans mightn't like it if I seemed to mix up in their affairs. Maybe if I gave it to Lucy's husband——"

"No—no! I take it back—I take it back——"

Belle handed it to her hastily. "I tell you what. The Squire'll be at the funeral to-morrow. I'll point him out to you, and you give it to him. He——" Belle whispered with painful distinctness, not certain of Berta's intelligence— "He—is—a lawyer. He knows—about—laws. Und'stand? He'll—see—that—Mareea—gets—her—

rights. Her rights! Und'stand that? You give—that paper—to the lawyer. He'll take care—of Mareea. Und'stand?"

Berta nodded vigorously. "Sure, I'm not a dummy. Sure I und'stand."

Belle felt important, a real conspirator. "D'you think she'll be well enough to go to the funeral? I don't believe she ought to try it."

Berta began to cry. "It hurts me she must suffer so. Oh, that fine, gran' young man! An' they were so lovin', like two pigeons, so lovin', so nice to each."

Belle put her finger to her lips. "Hsssh—you'll disturb her."

"I go down and help Missis Din. It mus' be a very big dinner to-morra after the funeral is preach'. Ev'ybody cookin' now."

"Yes, I know there'll be an awful crowd."

Berta hesitated. She had other grief besides mourning Wesley Dean. "Missis Din, she don' want me here. She wanna push me out. She don' like my cookin', she got colour' woman in the kitchen, an' ev'y time I begin to work, she take it outa my han's. Maybe I better go back to Balt'mer. On'y——" she looked at Mareea and the child and sighed.

Belle thought Berta a dreadful old creature, but it pleased her to stick a pin into Allie Dean's plans. "Well, don't you go unless Mareea tells you to," she counselled. "Don't you stir a step out of this house on Mrs. Dean's say-so. This house isn't Mrs. Dean's, it's Mareea's. That paper you've got there gives it all to her."

"My God!—this little bits of paper gives a big house and lands? Say, you take it, Mees, you keep. I'm a-scare' of it."

Mareea stirred and sighed, achingly, piteously. Belle took Wesley Dean's will and Berta slipped out. "I come back," she whispered.

Belle looked again at the will and then at Mareea. Even in slumber her mask of desolation had not relaxed or changed. "She's a rich widow," thought Belle, "but I'll bet a pretty she'd give every cent and go barefoot the rest of her days if it'd bring Wes' back. And so would I for her, the poor soul!"

After a while Allie Dean opened the door. "Oh, you here, Belle! I'm very much obliged, I'm sure, that somebody could make her hear to reason. So much to do and think about and she'd ought to be a help. It oughtn't to fall on Lucy and me. Maria hasn't acted right at all, but I'm thankful to get her out of that garden and in the house."

"I think she's pret' near crazy, Mrs. Dean—she's not responsible."

"She certainly acts like she's not." Ordinarily Allie Dean would never have talked so freely to Belle Lucas, but she was strained and overwrought, and burdened with the tiresome duties of a big country funeral. "Little enough she's got to mourn. I'm the one who's had the loss! My only son, my boy! And such a good boy till he went off the handle and married this—truck! She's only had him a year, but I bore him and brought him up and was with him all his life! I

never thought to lay my Wes' in the grave, Belle, never."

Belle wondered if she knew about the will. She believed not. Better say nothing of it, stick to safer topics. "No, Mrs. Dean, nobody could 've expected it," she said. "He was always healthy and strong—it's not right."

"I never was one to question the ways of my Creator," went on Allie Dean passionately, "and I can't help wonderin' if maybe God wasn't punishin' Wes' for this foolish, wicked marriage—you know what the Bible says about them that lusteth after strange women."

"I wouldn't believe in such a mean God! I don't see how you can even think of such a thing. Mareea's not wicked, she's only different from us. My gracious, Mrs. Dean, you talk like Mareea hadn't no soul!"

"I don't know as she has. More like a wild beast than a human being, she's always seemed to me."

Belle Lucas's expression warned Allie Dean that she was betraying the depth and violence of her hatred for Mareea. She checked herself, turned to the commonplace.

"Can you stay here with her and the baby all day and maybe to-night, Belle? That dirty old Berta's no earthly use, always underfoot, and Lucy and I've got so much on our hands. D'you suppose she'll be well enough to ride to the cemetery? We've got to plan who's to go in the first carriages. I've borrowed a veil for her, from Mrs. Tracy, if she goes."

"I don't see how you can tell how she'll be till tomorrow morning. She might hold out, and she might not.

Being the widow, she'd naturally have the first place." Belle could not resist this sling. She added, "I'll stay here with her gladly, Mis' Dean, and I can take care of her and the baby both. So you needn't have them on your mind.

"If she knew what I've got here in my hand," thought Belle as Allie Dean went away, "and her despising Mareea the way she does, she'd just as lief tear it up as not. I'll wrap it in my handkerchief and pin it to my corset cover till I see Squire Fiske." She looked at Mareea with generous pity. "I'm not going to let that old cat play any mean trick on you."

So all that day and night Belle stayed with Mareea. Now and then she roused her to take a nourishing drink, or to nurse her child, but even at such times Mareea did not come wholly from her stupor. She gulped down the glass of milk which Berta carried up and Belle held to her lips, she gave the baby her breast, but her eyelids scarcely lifted, and she said nothing coherent.

Meanwhile, below, the hushed and urgent activities went on. The same women who had cooked Lucy's wedding feast now toiled in the kitchen preparing the big funeral dinner, the last rite of hospitality the dead hands could offer. The house filled with relatives. Great-uncle Nate was there and his two sons and their wives, and Randall Covey had come and actually brought his mother, stirred by the tragedy out of her chronic invalidism. Other Saulsburys and Coveys, and Deans to the fourth and fifth of cousinship, had come, and the Tracys as in-laws must also be present.

They wore oddments of black clothes and subdued expressions. Each arriving group tiptoed into the darkened parlour to look at Wesley in his coffin. Tansy had been cut, and branches of laurel and cedar, and Fanny Covey had brought with her a great flat bouquet of late tuberoses which diffused their sharp mortuary sweetness about the room. The gazers murmured together. "Poor boy, don't he look natural!" And presently, "I've not seen a thing of his wife, you know, the foreign woman." To this the earlier comers would respond, "Allie says she's prostrated and can't see a soul." There would be speculation over this, with raised questioning brows and sly twists of the lips, and then, very cautiously, with a glance about to be sure none of the immediate family was near: "You don't know how the property was left, do you?" On this, though there were many conjectures, there was no real information.

By all this company, all this conversation, all this grisly viewing of the dead, Allie Dean and Lucy were flattered. At the moment when the greatest natural need of the human soul is privacy and still more privacy, they would have been indignant and thought themselves disgraced had it been accorded to them. It was the custom to gather and to mourn, and the more work it made for the bereaved family, the more the house was crowded and uncomfortable, the more often people asked to "view the corpse," the more words of condolence fell upon their anguished hearing, by just so much was their social position acknowledged and bulwarked.

"It'll be an enormous funeral," Lucy told her mother,

through her constant tears; "more carriages than have been in any funeral for ten years. I wish Bud could know it, Mother, indeed I do."

"Maybe he does," said Allie Dean. "The ways of the Lord are secret to His people."

She was profoundly glad that Mareea was not near to receive the attention which would inevitably have been accorded her as Wesley's widow, or to join in the discussion of the details of the funeral. Who was Mareea to know what was right and fitting on such an occasion? Allie Dean held the reins of authority firmly, she saw that no one was slighted or neglected, that all were greeted in the stricken sad voice proper to the occasion, that Tom Bowers unharnessed all the teams and fed and watered all the horses, that refreshment was offered, or if there was the least claim, the guests were urged to stay for supper and sleep the night in the house. This was the proper honour to the dead and to the living. In the end they had to convoy Great-uncle Nate back home and let him take with him such of the kin who would not resent being sent to another house. Under the Dean roof, with cots and improvised shakedowns, they managed to take care of fourteen extra people. Berta's small bed was appropriated, she was given a folded coverlet on the floor of Mareea's room, and Allie Dean herself lay on the dining-room lounge.

Yet it all went very quietly. The guests talked in undertones, moved cautiously, went to bed in silence. Nor did Bob Tracy and his father, the two watchers for the night, speak at all. They were not comfortable;

the still straightness of young Wes', lately so alive and quick, stirred them to unwonted thoughts. "He wasn't any more'n a year older'n I am," ran through Bob's head, "and now he lays there to speak no more." His father, too: "Been a heap better if it had of been one of us old fellers—me or old man Saulsbury, say." The pity, the injustice, the cruelty of this sudden quenching and pinching out of youth!

Belle lay down beside Mareea. She was very tired. She and Berta had tended the baby, laid it finally in a big chair, propped it safe with a pillow. They had debated this: "If we put him in beside her she might roll over and smother him—I've heard of such cases. She's not herself." This was Belle's opinion, and she would not listen to Berta's suggestion that the child sleep with her on her pallet. "Down on the floor! A teenty-weenty baby! Why, he might catch his death cold!" Belle, like most unmarried women, had strong fixed ideas on the care of children.

The boy had been unusually good during the day, crying little, easy to look after.

"He know his papa dead," said Berta, "that's why. Chil'en little like him so close to Heaven God still whisper to him. God say, 'Be good baby, no worry your poor mammy.'"

"For the mercy sake," replied Belle, "you do have the most outlandish ideas!" But by this time she and Berta were on such friendly terms that there was no offence in the comment, which was, indeed, made more in wonder than displeasure. They placed the chair with

the baby close to Mareea's side of the bed, and went to get what rest they could. They both fell at once into deep, weary sleep.

So it was Mareea who woke when the baby, early in the morning, raised his voice in a hungry whimper, and she woke fully, free from the chains of shock and exhaustion that had bound her latest hours. In her stupor she had forgotten that Wes' was dead, and for an instant she thought that Belle, lying beside her, was her husband. The relief, the instant's clear ecstasy was a miracle. It had all been a dream, a nightmare, a devilish, hideous falsity! She sat up and reached to take her baby, her mouth curving in eased, assured mirth at her phantasm. She hushed the child—he must not wake his father! And then, though Belle did not stir, slept on heavily, Mareea knew the truth, and for the first time felt the reality of Wes's death. And for the first time she rallied herself to meet and understand it.

There had been nothing in her life like this before. No discipline, no stress, no denials save the least consequent. She had not wanted very much, she had not expected very much, and she had not had very much—enough to eat, a roof over her head, Berta to laugh at and tease, unskilled work sufficient to pay her share of shelter and food and give her a new dress and a ribbon now and then to flaunt down the tenement stairs. She was strong and energetic, so the dreary, monotonous work she found did not break or even sap her high vitality. It had flowed over into dancing and quarrels and flirting and quick laughter and noisy tears. She had lived by im-

pulse, not by reason, and she was cheerfully, thoughtlessly selfish and undirected.

But marriage had changed her, wakened in her many dormant traits—the desire of possessions, to be rich—for she thought Wesley Dean's farm and house riches—then after this came her inherited passion for and understanding of the land, her kinship with the fruitful soil; later came her love and devotion for Wes' himself, slow in wakening, but complete, holding her flesh and spirit in a happy bondage. Symbol and portion of this love was the child, her son and Wes's. It came to her now that Wes' would never see his son again, that Wes'——

She began to wonder, she tried to remember, holding the baby carefully, touching with gentlest fingers his round warm little head just beginning to sprout a thick fuzziness, listening to him mouthing, gurgling at her breast, feeling him push against her—she tried to remember—about Wes'. Her long, stupefied sleep had bewildered her; she was not sure how much of time had passed. Had they taken him, had they dared to take Wes' away from her and not let her look at him once more? No, she was curiously certain that he was still beneath the same roof with her and their child, she could feel that he was near. Slowly and very softly she rose and opened the door. Below there were dim lamps burning, and the decaying sweetness of the tuberoses had penetrated to the hallway—those thick white flowers that rot like human flesh and have its rotting

odour! Mareea shuddered and drew back for a moment from that odour. It made death so sure, so close.

Then she came steadily on down the stairs. Bob Tracy was dozing, his father was snoring, drooping and crumpled and cramped in the biggest chairs. At midnight they had had coffee—the empty cups were on the table. The smell of charred wick from the lamp, turned too low, fought with the nauseous flowers. In all the scene there was but one thing of dignity, one thing aloof and fine. Wesley Dean was still master in his own house.

Mareea stood beside him, looking at him, waiting. By some trick of light his eyes seemed open, seemed to see her. She leaned to him—he might speak—he might! Oh, she was sure——

The child moved, rubbing his small head against her for warmth, for comfort. No, he would not speak—her Wes'. All that she had of him living was here in her arms, all she would ever have of him again. She held his child and thought it out slowly, each cold conclusion passing through her mind with actual physical pain, pain she could hardly bear. Wes' was dead. He was gone. Gone away for good. She must live on without him for this child, this helpless demanding lump of flesh, her burden and her consolation.

One by one these thoughts pressed down, weights to smother and quench the fire within her. She was sinking, dying, under the horrible weight of these thoughts. But she would not flinch away, she would not deny them. Here and now, alone with him, she must know whether

her fire was to burn on or snuff out in despair. If standing beside him, she could force herself to accept his death, and her loneliness, and her duty to the child, accept them without screaming her protests and her agony, then she could live on; she would have done the hardest thing of all for utter grief to do.

"If I know he is dead, and I do not die, then I need not be afraid of anything, ever, for nothing worse can happen to me," she thought.

Bob Tracy had been half conscious for some moments of a strange white figure dimly before his vision. It grew more clear. He put a slack fist to his eyes, then started to his feet. "Mareea! I didn't hear you come down! Whatsa matter—ain't there anybody with you?" He was afraid she might make a scene such as Lucy had described about the cradle.

But Mareea did not answer. She turned and went upstairs again, slowly, but assured. She knew now that a heart may break, but courage goes marching on.

Chapter Nineteen

"So FAR as I know," said Allie Dean with dignity, "he didn't leave any will."

Great-uncle Nate, plagued with senile curiosity, had raised the question. The funeral service, the funeral dinner were over, the guests, except a few close relatives, had mounted into their various buggies and surreys and daytons and driven away, fully satisfied with the conduct of the mournful affair. Mareea, in borrowed black, had gone to church and cemetery, and had appeared sufficiently overcome to satisfy the general curiosity about her state of mind, and there was matter for rich comment because she had kept Belle Lucas beside her. Since they had come back to the house she had sat quietly with her child, answering with weary patience the probing, condoling remarks offered. Belle had convinced her that Wes' would like her to do all this, that if she did not do it she would seem lacking in respect and affection for him. The active management of the day she left to Allie Dean as she had left what had gone before.

Randall Covey hovered about her. Her creamy pallor, her tragic eyes, her drooping, forlorn quiescence brought back to him the fascination she had exerted on him at Lucy's wedding. A whisper went round that maybe

Randy wouldn't mind stepping into Wes' Dean's shoes.

There was a general impression, sprung from Mareea's taking such a subordinate part and Allie Dean's prominence, that the property was coming to the older woman, and that she knew it. So, when Allie Dean said clearly that she did not know of any will, there was a rustle of surprise and inquiry. Would the infant son, then, inherit? How did the law stand as to "widow's thirds"? And wouldn't the child require a guardian? Wasn't it likely that Wes' Dean would prefer his sensible, God-fearing mother to look after his child's interests, rather than his strange, flighty, foreign wife?

They got no further. Squire Fiske had left the house to go out to his buggy, but now he came back, disturbed, frowning. "I would like to speak to you, Mrs. Dean," he said, going straight to Mareea.

She had seen the white-haired, tall old man before and admired him without the touch of awe which most people felt for him. "But here I am," she said, not stirring.

He looked about the room—he knew everyone and recognized the ties of blood. "I will then make this statement before all of those present, though it most concerns you, Mrs. Dean. I have had placed in my hands a paper which purports to be the last will and testament of your late husband. Though slightly informal, it is written, signed, and witnessed in a manner which leaves no doubt in my mind of its entire legality. It makes you, his wife, the sole heir of all his property."

No one moved—no one spoke. "Having made this

statement, I would be glad to talk with you privately, Mrs. Dean," went on Squire Fiske. Under his severe eyes the others rose and went out, Great-uncle Nate last, mumbling protests—but going. Alone with Mareea, the Squire became less formidable. He sat down beside her and spoke in a kind voice. "Did you know of the existence of this will?" he asked.

Mareea put her hand to her cheek. "When he was so sick he asked for a paper an' pen, an' wrote off somethin'. I did not know what it was, I did not notice, I did not care."

"He didn't tell you that he had made it? He didn't give it to you to keep?"

"No, nothin'."

"I do not consider this a very wise or judicious will. It practically disinherits his child, in case you were to marry again."

"Oh, my God!" cried Mareea. "You sit here in this room where my Wes' was layin' in his coffin this very mornin', an' you talk to me of more marryin'! I thought you was a good old man—a wise old man. Now I see you are no better as an old fool."

Squire Fiske was not accustomed to being called hard names, nor to rebellion, nor to contempt. But this outburst of Mareea's did not antagonize him. "She's got a mind of her own and a high spirit," he thought. He liked people to have minds and spirits. He had dealt with too many human sheep not to find the change agreeable.

"Ma'am," he apologized in the grand manner, "my remark was indeed lacking in sensibility, and I humbly

beg your pardon. Nevertheless, I feel you must be warned how little the interests of this child are taken into account by this will."

Mareea comprehended the general drift. "You think Wes' did not take care of his child? You think I won' take care of him? You tell me how to take the right care an' I'll do it."

He drew his chair closer and explained to her simply what legal forms must be gone through with Wes's will, and why she should, with so much property, at once make a will in favour of the child. He was considerate and patient, and when she saw that he was not a partisan or a confederate of Allie Dean she began to trust him and to feel that she had found someone on whom she could rely. At the end of their talk she said, "I want you for a friend. I don' know about these things, nobody never tol' me. I am dumb and thick about them. Are you goin' to help me?"

"You are not dumb and thick," said the Squire. "You are very smart to learn. When you need advice you come in town and see me or send word to me to come out here. I'll stand by you. And remember, this property is yours: the land, the stock, the house, the furniture, the tools and machinery and vehicles, the poultry, the gathered and ungathered crops, everything. You are absolute mistress here. I wish that at first you would make no move without consulting me as to your best interests. And I will now say to you what I say to all my clients—never act in haste, and never sign your name to any paper unless you understand

exactly what is written upon it. If everyone would observe these two rules there would be fewer lawyers needed." He rose and ceremoniously offered his hand.

"Permit me to add," he said, "not as your lawyer, but as a professing Christian and your sincere friend, that I pray God may bless and console you, and that your child may grow up as honest and respected as was his young father."

"Oh, you are good," said Mareea, near to tears. "I am ashame' I call you an ol' fool."

"I fear the description was too exact," admitted the Squire. She walked to the door with him, looking up at him gratefully. They passed through the clustered, waiting relatives, and when the Squire had gone, Great-uncle Nate voiced the sentiment of the others. "Well, well," he said, "did Squire tell y'? Y' git it all, do y'? Nothin' to Allie here, nor Lucy?"

Mareea looked at Allie Dean as she answered. "He say this place is mine, an' all on it, an' I am not to do anything at all unless I come and talk to him."

"Well, sirree!" champed the old man. "Nothin' to you, Allie, an' nothin' to Lucy. O' course he'd provided for Lucy before, an' you got your own proputty, Allie. I say he done fair an' right. You walk light, girl, an' go easy, an' you'll get along, an' if you want Nate Saulsbury's best advice in any tight place, all you got to do is say so." Having made this declaration of friendship and alliance, Great-uncle Nate got up and went his way.

Allie Dean had listened to her uncle without glancing toward him for fear lest she show her resentment. No

one better knew his teasing, petty moods. He didn't care if it was his own niece, his twin brother's child, who was thus left out and set aside. He was born contrary and would die so, thought Allie Dean—and though she had long recognized this as a fact, it always had the power to chafe her.

No one else seemed to have anything to say, but the air was hostile to Mareea and sympathetic to Allie Dean. Even Randy Covey was shocked that Wes' Dean should have completely denied his blood and handed over everything he had to an alien. Of course, on second thought, it made Mareea a well-to-do widow. And likewise, of course, as Uncle Nate, the smart old codger, had pointed out, Cousin Allie and Cousin Lucy weren't penniless. But there was something disloyal about leaving everything—*everything*—clear out of the family, so. What if the girl went back to Baltimore and picked up a foreign husband and brought him down here. He looked at his cousin Allie to see how she was taking it, but she was sitting stiff and straight with her eyes cast down. Something about her rigidity struck Randy's imagination. "It's rat poison to her, the whole thing," he thought.

Mareea looked round at them, and saw Great-uncle Nate was the only one with a spark of kindness for her. She was alone, among enemies, with Allie Dean ready to inflame them against her. Her only shield, her only weapon were the resources Wes' had left to her. Without them she would be nowhere, without them she would have been at the cold mercy of people who despised and

distrusted her. But Wes' had safeguarded her, he had known, he was still standing between her and them. Her love for him, her sorrow for him were welded by a passionate gratitude for his protection. If she could only have told him—if she had only known!

"Oh," she cried, accusing her enemies, "you don' care if Wes' is dead! You don' care how good he was, how good! The bes' man in all this worl'! All you sittin' here sayin', 'Where's his money? Where's his money?' All hypocrites an' false-faces you are!"

She ran out to get away from them, down to her refuge, the garden. The light was soft, the shadows' long fingers stretched lightly over the fading green. A few last evening primroses along the path had opened yellow clock faces that told the time of day. But Mareea did not see the shadows, did not see the flowers, though their pollen made dusty marks on her sweeping black skirt. She had dropped far down from the height of the night before. It was too hard, her task. Too hard. She could not do it. She was too alone, too ignorant, too heartsick. She could not go on without Wes'. His death had drained her life of laughter and ease and pleasant ways, of kindness, of knowing herself supremely beloved and cherished. She looked at the immensity of the sky paling into the sunset and felt herself a mere rag of a creature, a mote too small for notice, worthless, null.

"Nobody cares what I do. I have got nobody!" she thought drearily. "Oh, my dear Wes', my own dear Wes'—I cannot be without you." She put her hands over her face and cried and cried, tears she could not

stop. Her chaotic thoughts went back to the tenements in Baltimore, to Jennie Trupa who had lived two flights below the room she shared with Berta. Jennie's husband had been killed in a cave-in while digging for the new station. And Jennie had locked the door, put on her white wedding dress and wreath, taken the bread knife, and, lying down composedly, had cut the veins of her wrists to let out the life she valued no more. What if she, Mareea, did the same? Frank Trupa was a poor creature compared to Wesley Dean—ugly, cruel, drunken, unreasonably jealous. But Jennie had loved him. Didn't she, Mareea, love Wes' as much?

Last night she had thought she must live for the child —but without him in her arms this claim was not so binding. He was very little, too little to know, or care. It would be long years before he would be more than a trouble and worry to her—children were always trouble and worry. She could lie down, out here in the twilight, and die as quietly and gladly as Jennie Trupa—oh, much more gladly. And everyone would be happier. Mrs. Dean, Lucy, all those hypocrites and false-faces in the house would be glad that she had taken herself out of their way. Berta would cry, but Berta was old, Berta didn't matter.

She heard someone coming; she caught her breath, wiped her face, and turned. It was Tom Bowers, troubled and uneasy.

"I thought I better see you, Mis' Dean," he said slowly. "I thought I better see you even if it didn't seem real feelin' to talk about things to-day. But some

things won't wait. We stand to lose the last of the tomatoes less'n we get right at the pickin'. I'd like to know your wishes." He scraped the gravel with his foot, his drawling voice quickened. He had begun with the tomatoes but he had far more serious matters on his mind. "I was one o' the witnesses to Wes's will. I know the farm's yourn. Mis' Allie she come out and begun talkin' to me, but I wouldn't give her aye, yes, nor no. If Squire Fiske says the farm's yourn, there's nothin' Mis' Allie c'n do to change it."

"What she say, Tom? She don' like it, huh?" asked Mareea listlessly.

"I don't want to talk against Mis' Allie, but when Squire Fiske says that will's legal 'tain't no use for her to say maybe it ain't. You'd oughta speak to the Squire, seems to me, and make sure." He was divided; by nature and precedent he sided with Allie Dean, but he had the Anglo-Saxon's respect for the law. Besides, he remembered Mareea and Wes' dancing and singing in the barn like children—so gay, so happy! That was so little a time back, and now Wes' was dead, and his wife near drowned with crying. He felt an inarticulate pity and responsibility for her. And Allie Dean had been too short and masterful with him—his masculinity resented that.

"He said it was sure, Tom—he said this place was all mine, tight and fast."

"Well, then——" he wouldn't go on telling tales of Allie Dean. He'd warned Mareea; that was all his duty. Back to the tomatoes—"Well, then, it's right you should

have the say about things. We got to get at the work. Work won't wait for sorrer, not farm work. It won't wait for nothin'. I wouldn't like to see them tomatoes rot on the vines."

"Tell me what you think, Tom," she sighed impatiently. "What mus' I do?"

"I c'n go right ahead—o' course with Wes' gone we'll be kinda short-handed, but we c'n manage with the two boys we got this fall, I reckon. I c'n go right ahead if you say so."

It all crowded in, thrusting her back from quiet, from rest, from peace—Allie Dean's interference, Tom's insistence, the farm's need of a captain, and the work, the work! No use to envy Jennie Trupa. She started to walk toward the house with Tom, she tried to think, to decide.

"You go on, you go on, Tom. Pick the tomatoes like you say. In a little, maybe, I'll get my head clear up. Now—I'm all kinda muddle."

"I reckon so. I wouldn't 've troubled you, only with Mis' Allie puttin' in, I thought you'd ought to know it, an' have your own say-so. I know what's fair an' right's well's the next one." In his own mind he had determined that if things went badly he'd get out at the end of his year's contract. Till then, he'd stay and do his full day's stint. He turned toward the barn. "G'night, Mis' Dean —I'll get a real early start to-morrow."

"Good-night, Tom—I'm much oblige'."

Berta came running. "Mareea, my pigeon, my dove —the baby is yell his breath out for you. Where you

been so long? You got me scare—I think maybe you bad sick——"

They were all pulling her back: Tom Bowers, Berta, the baby, and that "early start in the morning." All of them holding her from the easy way, the way to Wes's side.

"I ain' sick," she said. "W'ere's the baby?"

They were at the door and she saw that Allie Dean was holding the baby, walking him up and down, talking to him, trying to hush his indignant, imperative wails. His arms and legs were waving, his little head bobbing about, his blue eyes running with angry tears. "Wa-a-a," howled the baby, furious with neglected hunger, "wa-a-a-a!"

"I take him," said Mareea. She sat down in the empty dining room and gave him her breast. Oh, but she was tired—tired all over, beaten, dead. "W'ere's ev'ybody?" she asked dully.

"Gone home. Lucy and Bob left good-bye for you." Allie Dean sat down, too, with the sag of exhaustion. The two sad women in their black clothes made the room dark, as if night had closed down. The way Allie Dean drooped, leaning her head on her bony, work-worn hand, made Mareea look at her more closely, made her think of her. This was the woman who had held and nursed the dead Wes' when he was a baby, just such a baby as this little living Wes' whom she held now. She was not a kind woman, nor just, she was not Mareea's friend, and it was the fault of her obstinacy that her

Wes' had died. "How would I feel to-night," thought Mareea, "if I had been the one to send him to his death as she did? How would I feel if I had that blood guilt on me? O Holy Virgin—if I had done it, I'd have kill myself quick, like Jennie Trupa, an' nothin' could have stop me."

Her grief was a leaven, working slowly and painfully in her ignorance and young hardness, changing them as leaven changes the raw stuff of bread, flour and water, salt and fat, into something fit for the use and sustenance of humanity. Her grief was a treasure of alchemy turning the lead and dross of her nature into the gold of understanding, of tolerance, of mercy.

Allie Dean was thinking, too. She had lost everywhere. She had lost her son twice over—first to his wife, now to death. She had lost the Dean house, the Dean land, that had seemed entirely her own. She had lost her niche at Lucy's, her first place in Lucy's affection. "I am stripped and naked like Job," she thought. "I am chastised, like him, to prove my integrity before the Lord." But like Job she would stand upright before the Lord and acknowledge His power, but declare that she had done no sin, that she had, even as he, spoken of God "the thing that is right." She remembered with satisfaction how Job had been justified, how his prosperity and place had been restored to him twice over. God, she felt, could do no less for her. And Mareea, the instrument of all her trouble, would reap the punishment she deserved. Once again her hate of Mareea rose up and possessed her. She would not think about Wes' because it dimmed her

hate of Mareea. She looked at Mareea with the child, Wes's child. If she could only get that child for herself! It could not be God's will that a child should be left to the care of heathens such as Mareea and Berta, when she was there, ready, eager to bring him up as he should go. Her love and desire for the child were mingled inextricably with her grief for Wes' and her hate for Mareea.

She began to scheme, to plot. She must stay here, if she was to get the child. She meant to stay anyway until she was certain that the will would hold, that there was no chance to save the farm from Mareea's clutch. She was sure, because she hated Mareea so much, that Mareea hated her in the same way. She did not guess, she could not imagine the pity for her that Mareea felt. "I suppose," she said slyly, "you want that I should leave here and go live somewhere else."

This was a test. If Mareea told her to stay, it would be weakness, it would be because she was afraid the will was not legal, and so she wanted to placate and conciliate her mother-in-law.

But to Mareea, the question was a truce. She knew Allie Dean had never liked her, she had said often to Wes' that his mother hated her, but she knew nothing of what that hate really meant, or what a self-sanctified fanatic will do in cruelty and spite under the name of God. She wondered why Allie Dean wanted to stay. Mareea considered. No, she couldn't tell Wes's mother to get out of Wes's house on the day of his funeral. Wes's mother was a bad old woman, and hard to live

with, but she was Wes's mother, and Wes had loved her. "If he was livin', I could tell her to go—but not when he is dead," thought Mareea. And there was her own newborn pity for Wes's mother. But even so, she wanted the situation clear.

"I wouldn' send you off," she said at last. "Only—like I tol' you when I first come las' year—we can get along if you are not too bossy. If you stay here, you are not boss, an' you must treat me an' Berta all right."

Berta's name was a challenge.

"Are you going to keep that old scarecrow?"

Mareea raised her voice a trifle. Her pity for Allie Dean grew fainter. She was so tired, her nerves were worn to the quick. "Berta stays here so long as I stay, an' you treat her decent or you get out. She ain' no more an ol' scarecrow as you are. She's a good ol' woman. Oh, Godlemighty, less quit this meanness an' have some peace in this house, for there won't never be no more happiness with Wes' gone."

She got up and laid the baby on the lounge. It was night now, truly. She lit the lamp and took down the keys. "I'll go an' lock up ev'ything at the barn, then I'm goin' to bed. We gotta make an early start in the mornin'. Tom says the work's behind."

"You'll have to hire another hand, I reckon," said Allie Dean, and Mareea's quick ear caught the "you" instead of "we" or "I." It signalled to her that Allie Dean was going to stay, but that she was yielding outward authority.

"I don' need no other man right off. I'm goin' to help pick tomatoes myself. Maybe Berta, too."

"You can't go out in the field and work with the men —it's not right and fitting. And with the baby——"

Mareea's pity vanished completely. "I guess you don' remember who's boss here now. You better not forget no more." She flung that back sharply as she went out with the keys.

Chapter Twenty

She could not stop listening for his step, waiting for him to come in at evening. She dreamed of him often and would wake calling his name joyfully because he had returned to her—only to find herself alone, the place beside her empty. Though it was almost unbearably desolate to wake to this solitude, this barrenness, Mareea loved her dreams. Wes' must still be close to her, she thought, if he could come to her in sleep.

When she was awake she kept at work. As she had told Allie Dean that she would, she went into the field and worked beside the men. She picked tomatoes, she stripped fodder, she sacked the dug potatoes, gathered winter apples. It was a good day for her when she was too tired at night to lie awake and cry.

The field hands did not like her presence, but after a little she won from them a grudged respect. She let them alone, gave them no orders, made it appear that Tom Bowers was authority as indeed he must be because of her inexperience. Tom Bowers liked her, and worked honestly for her. He told his wife: "She ain't nobody's fool, even if she has got queer ways of doing. She'll run this place good as Wes' did, once she gets the right hang of it. She's quick to get on to things."

"I don't consider she acts like a lady," replied Mrs. Bowers.

Casper Nichols, Manie's father, a leader in all church activities on the Sabbath and a usurious money-lender and note-shaver on week days, was one of those who held the same opinion as Cora Bowers. He drove out to the Dean farm the week after Wes's death and tried to buy it for half its worth.

He had apostolic whiskers and the unctuous voice and august manner that often go with them. "You can't manage a big place like this, Mrs. Dean," he warned Mareea, having haled her to the edge of the tomato field on the excuse of important business. "You'll let it run down till it won't bring a fair price. If you take a cash sum for it now and invest in first mortgages you could live in town and have your money coming to you regular twice a year when int'rest is paid."

"I ain't goin' to sell," said Mareea, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She did not like Casper Nichols—he seemed to her a male edition of Allie Dean.

"I'm advising you for your best interests. I'm a sight older'n you are, and I never saw a woman yet could run a farm."

Mareea was beginning to feel annoyed. "You're right old, but you ain't dead yet, so you still got somethin' to see."

Mr. Nichols controlled his anger at having his helpful intentions rejected. "You'll never get a fairer offer than I'm prepared to make. If you have to make a forced sale you won't get near so much."

"How much you offerin' me?" asked Mareea.

"Ten thousand dollars." He rolled it magnificently.

"Well, get in your buggy and go home. I ain't goin' to sell this farm an' I'm busy." She picked up her basket and went back to the tomatoes.

When she reported this interview to Squire Fiske the old man chuckled and slapped his leg. "I wish I'd been there," he said.

He was very kind to Mareea, Squire Fiske. He helped her through her appearance in the Orphan's Court, and taught her the rudiments of banking. Mareea was suspicious of the bank. "If I put my money in there, can I get it out again, any time?" she asked. "Any time at all I want it?"

He reassured her, showed her how to draw a check for money to pay her men, how to figure her balance. When the undertaker's bill was settled there was not a great deal left. "But you'll be all right if you keep your expenses down till you get the cash for your tomatoes," said Squire Fiske.

"I want to put a fine stone on my Wes's grave. A big fine white stone. Can I do that?"

"Better wait a while. Hold your hosses till the tomatoes are paid for, and you see how much corn you got to sell and how much you get for it. And don't forget you got to keep enough corn to seed with next spring, and to feed all through the winter."

"My God," sighed Mareea, "you an' Tom Bowers think of so much! I need to sell my corn for money, an' I have to keep it for the horses to eat."

"If you feel the place is too much for you—if you'd really like to sell——"

"No, I won't sell. I am piece of that land, that land is piece of me. Only it is so hard—without my Wes'."

"I know it is, child. But you're doing all right. It won't be long before your boy'll be big enough to help you."

Mareea looked at him wistfully. How little he knew about the length of time! Every day was a year, every month a century. The baby, though he grew like the weeds in her garden, was still so small, so helpless. "I wisht I could buy jus' that tombstone," she said. "I don' like it that Wes' has no mark to his grave."

"You better wait till next spring," cautioned the old man.

"Missis Din talks about it."

"Let her pay for it then. She's got plenty to do it with."

"I never will!" cried Mareea. "I never will let her pay one cent of it! Never, never, never!"

"Don't you and she get along any better?" asked the Squire sympathetically.

"We don' fight out loud much. But she is always thinkin' an' lookin' mean to me. Oh, I don' care. Nothin' makes a difference to me."

"It's strange to me that she stays on."

"It's the baby," said Mareea, "it's my little Wes'. He's got a magic for her. She hangs onto him, she makes dress' for him, she fuss around about him. Well, you see,

that's not so bad—while I'm out workin' she watch that baby ever' minute."

But Mareea did not know how much, how devotedly Allie Dean loved her grandson. She would hardly permit Berta to touch him, grudged her looking at him. She had tried to cajole Mareea into giving up the care of him at night. "My room's bigger, there's more air. And you sleep so hard, you don't always hear him when he wakes up and cries," she urged.

"Will you nurse him then?" asked Mareea. Which settled the matter for the time. But Allie Dean thought with satisfaction that he must be weaned when he was a year old—and then——!

As the autumn waned and the winter closed down there was less work outside for Mareea. She went more to the barn and the stables, learned to feed and water the stock, and how to milk, and how to bed down the cattle for the night. But that could not fill the long hours of her days. When she was in the house she would take the child, and Allie Dean fretted jealously. But she did not say much for fear Mareea would keep the child altogether.

The winter was hard for the three women, so ill-assorted, so uncongenial. Left to themselves, Mareea and Berta might have been comfortable, but there was always Allie Dean between them, unfriendly, critical, acid-sharp. The habit of life in the house was simple and dull. Berta got up first in the morning, shook herself into her dress and shoes—she slept in all her other clothes—and creakingly went down to the kitchen,

started the fire, put on the kettle. Then Mareea and Allie Dean would go down, Mareea with the baby wrapped in a shawl. Allie Dean opened the banked fires of the dining room and built them up, and Mareea put the baby on the lounge, took an old coat, and went out with the keys. Nick came leaping from the woodshed to meet her. If it was very cold she ran all the way, her breath making white balloons to fly before her. She took the milk pails with her.

Tom Bowers would be in the barn, carrying water, throwing down hay and fodder, counting ears of corn into the feed boxes. Mareea would nod to him and go into the cow shed, begin the milking. She left one pail where Tom could get it. The cat came down from the loft and begged for warm milk.

By the time she had milked three cows Tom would be beginning his three. Then Mareea would go to open the chicken house, scatter food for the fowls, wheat left over from the fanning, full of chaff and cockle seed, broken corn, a cabbage stalk or two. She rinsed and filled their water dishes.

When this was done Tom was through milking and Mareea would take both pails and come back to the house, carrying them carefully, intent not to spill. The sun struck full in her eyes, chilly gold, but promise of a clear day, her feet thumped against the bumpy frozen ground, the thin cold air filled her lungs, flung scarlet on her cheeks.

She brought the milk into the house; Allie strained it and put it to heat in shallow pans, very slowly, on

the back of the stove. She claimed that the cream rose better for this heating. The milk was not kept in the spring house during the cold weather, but in the big wooden food safe in the outer kitchen room.

Now breakfast was ready, the changeless breakfast of winter—fried sausage with gravy, hominy, griddle cakes, coffee. The table was set with its red-checked cloth, the white china, the bone-handled knives and forks. The three women ate in silence, Berta waiting on the others, neglecting her own plate to fry a griddle of fresh cakes, or fetch more honey and syrup.

After breakfast came the turn of young Wes'. Berta maintained that so much washing was dangerous to the child's health, but here Allie Dean and Mareea were as one against her, and the baby had his splashing warm bath each morning before the dining-room fire. Mareea bathed him, with Allie Dean hovering about, her covetous fingers itching for the task. The bath over, if Mareea had work to do, Allie Dean seized her chance to rock him into his morning nap.

If Mareea could find anything to do outside she did not stay in the house. She couldn't clean the stables, or go chopping firewood with Tom Bowers, but she could carry in the day's supply of fuel, shell corn and fetch the cobs for kindling, open the caves where the vegetables were buried, and if it was not too cold, rake up the never-ending trash and burn it. If there was snow—though snow was rare and light—she swept the porches and cleared away a space before the chicken house where

the fowls would stuffily promenade, their heads drawn down in their feathers, chilly and cross.

Dinner was at twelve. Berta would have potato soup or beans, or black-eye peas cooked with rusty pork, turnips or carrots, fried apples, hot biscuit, crumb pie. The short winter afternoon seemed no more than a gleam of frosty sun before the twilight closed down, sometimes still and clear, sometimes with gusts of icy wind that whistled under the doors and at the cracks of the windows. Tom Bowers packed straw and sacking around the barn pump, and Mareea tossed down extra bedding for the cattle. The cat disappeared, buried in the hayloft, and Nicky whined to come into the house, shivering with his tail between his legs, making piteous eyes. The chickens went early to their roosts. Mareea got the eggs from the laying shed, helped with the night's milking, and finally locked once more the crib, the granary, the chicken house, the stables. She and Tom talked a moment about the stock—the cows that would calve, and where to get lumber to mend the hog house before young pigs were bought. The old hogs had been killed in November and there had been the usual three-day orgy of scalding and scraping and cleaning and cutting up, the making of sausage and lard, head cheese and scrapple, the salting and smoking. The two pigs Great-uncle Nate had given Mareea outweighed the others.

Supper was at six: coffee, fried bread, or mush and milk, cold meat or stew or boiled salt fish, canned fruit,

apple sauce, and cake. And then the evening, when there was nothing to do but sit before the fire and hold the baby and think about Wes'. Mareea could hardly bear the evenings. Berta nodded in a corner, Allie Dean placed herself straight and stiff under the light and sewed and knitted. It gave Mareea the fidgets to see Allie Dean's busy hands, and she tried not to look at them. She tried not to look out of the window, too, when the moon turned the world to chill white splendour and made her think of Wes's grave. She wished she could see the grave as the moon must be seeing it.

Every Sunday, even if she did not go to church, Mareea went out to the cemetery and stood by the grave and talked to Wes'. She cut pine and hemlock in the woods and made two wreaths for the grave, one for the foot and one for the head, and as these wreaths dried and shattered she made fresh ones. In the spring she meant to plant evergreens and ivy that it might never be bare. Allie Dean was not pleased with the wreaths. "They look to me like the Christmas decorations in the Sunday-school room," she replied sourly.

"Then you ought to like 'em, you got so much religion," replied Mareea, and made the next wreaths larger. She knew that Wes' liked the wreaths for they came from the woods where they had walked and laughed together.

Always she thought of Wes', always she referred to him whatever she meant to do. In the evenings, as she held the child, she went over the day and offered it, word by word, act by act, to Wes', just as she had done

when he was living. It kept him, she felt, near her. She did not tell this to Allie Dean. Allie Dean considered that Mareea sat "like a lump," she was so silent, stared so hard at the fire, nothing to say. "You'd think," Allie Dean said to herself, with ever-fresh indignation, "that she'd try to learn how to sew decently, and hemstitch and embroider, so's to give this child some sort of clothes. But she don't care. She's a lump." But Allie Dean would have been far more indignant had the work of making clothes for the baby been taken over by Mareea. Allie Dean made him beautiful clothes, far too elaborate. She put eyelets and scallops and hemstitching and narrow lace crocheted from the finest thread on everything he wore. She was triumphant that she could do something for young Wes' that his mother couldn't. It made her feel more and more superior to Mareea, more possessive of the child.

Berta was always the first to go to bed at night. After her head had dropped down and jerked up half a dozen times she'd stretch and yawn and creep away, so sleepy she could hardly put one foot before the other. Later Allie Dean would fold up her work and put it in its basket and say, "I'll hold the baby whilst you bank the fires." Mareea put a blanket of ashes over the bright coals, locked the doors, and the two women went upstairs to the unheated bedrooms—not too cold, for the stair doors were left open all day that the heat might ascend, but they seemed arctic after the toasting warmth of the hearth. For this excursion the baby was wrapped in the big shawl, and Mareea carried a hot

brick or sandbag to warm the bed for him. He slept beside her and he was good, quiet the whole night through, cooing like a happy pigeon when he woke in the morning. A good, healthy baby. Oh, if Wes' could only see him! On nights when she could not sleep Mareea lay thinking of Wes', and tears flowed from her eyes down on the pillow, and she wished hopelessly that she had done as Jennie Trupa had. Then the baby would stir, and she would pull the covers about him gently and fling her love for him over and around him as a cover more complete, more protecting than any quilt or blanket or shawl, however thick and warm. Leave Wes's child to the narrow clutch of Allie Dean? Never, never, no matter how lonely, how miserable, how hard her life might be! And at last she would sleep and walk in those precious dreams when Wes' came back to her and spoke and smiled.

And in the morning the same dull day began all over again. Once in a while they had visitors. Lucy and Bob drove over sometimes on Sundays, but not very often, because Bob was eager to offer advice to Mareea about the farm, and this annoyed Lucy, who believed that Mareea purposely started these conversations to draw his interest. Lucy thought Bob irresistible to all women. Nor was Lucy better pleased with her mother's passion for the child. "You'd think nobody ever had a grandchild before, the way Mom carries on, "Lucy complained to Bob. "I told her I'd got two quilts to piece and a whole lot of other sewing, and she never offered to help me one stitch. Says the baby grows so fast keeps her

busy making him new things! What's Maria for—she's the child's mother!"

No, Lucy did not like it. She had not wanted her mother to come and stay with her indefinitely and tell her how to run her house, but she could use her mother's aid in occasional tedious tasks very well. "Next thing she'll be willing the baby her property," she said gloomily, "as if Maria hadn't got enough off the Deans already."

Miss Estella Swann, unbidden, but very welcome, came to the farm twice during the winter, and revised Mareea's clothes with a stern hand. "You *got* to wear a veil till the full year of your mournin's out. . . . Yes, even when you ride int' town to buy groceries. You *got* to keep on black for two years, one year after you lay off the veil."

"I feel so sad, black all over, lookin' out a black veil. It's like the funeral lasted on an' on an' on."

"You'd feel sadder if you didn't pay proper respect to the dead."

"I'm sick to death people sayin' 'proper respect.' I *loved* my Wes', I love him now, the same he was alive. Ain' that enough?"

Miss Estella was crafty. "If you want folks to think you didn't care nothin' about him but was cuttin' your eye for another husband, all you got to do is lay off that black and start out in colours."

"Another husband! Godlemighty, I'll wear black all my life sooner's that."

To this, skeptical Miss Estella did not reply. She had

made second wedding dresses for too many young widows to believe Mareea's protest. "They all say it," she thought, "and they think they mean it. But lawsy—'twouldn't be nature if they did." However, she had carried her point as to Mareea keeping in black, and that was all she wished.

Belle was another occasional visitor, and when Mareea drove into Eden she nearly always went to the Lucas house for a few minutes. Belle was robust, and cheerful, and sympathetic, and she was the only person who could talk to Mareea of Wes' and not make her cry, for she talked of him as laughing and alive and that was the way Mareea dreamed of him.

But save for the Squire, Miss Estella, and Belle, Mareea had gone backward in public esteem. It was offensive to the neighbourhood that she should be Wes's sole heir, and the tales of her working in the field with the hired men, the burned and broken cradle, Casper Nichols's account of her rude refusal of his offer for the farm—all these accentuated the suspicions of her queerness, her outlandishness, and what was locally called her "unwomanliness." The stranger in a country community who does not hew close to the line of established custom, and acquiesce in every convention, is always disliked, spied on, slurred. A woman without a man beside her must be doubly anxious not to offend local prejudice, however narrow and ignorant. Allie Dean saw perfectly how Mareea placed herself at a constant disadvantage, but set herself up higher because of it. Her martyred eyes, her pursed lips, and her deprecatory

"I hope I can always do my duty as I see it, no matter what it costs me" lost friends for Mareea, helped her unpopularity, made Allie Dean more sanctified.

Mareea knew that people did not like her, but she did not care. Her life was a flinty road which she must tread, however wincingly. Each day was a test of endurance. What did it matter that Mrs. Cameron barely spoke to her, while she greeted Allie Dean with effusive warmth! That Manie Nichols crossed the street to avoid her! That other good churchwomen failed to see her as she passed in her black dress and veil! They were only phantoms, they could do nothing to make her more unhappy, more alone. She looked forward longingly to the spring when there would be work for her—real work, not puttering in the barn and woodshed—little made-up errands to get out of the sight of Allie Dean's cold eyes, her thin, grasping hands.

Though human beings drew themselves away from Mareea, did not want her, she found herself growing increasingly knowledgeable of the cattle; the horses knew her, and the cows. She could call them, handle them, go in beside them more easily than Tom Bowers. And they were so kind and warm and silent that she loved them, and their dependence on her strengthened her will to go on. Sometimes she wrapped up the child and brought him out to the barn and held him for the beasts to see, and talked to them about him, and to him about them. She knew they understood. The loneliness was not so cutting when she walked young Wes' down the barn floor and lifted him up before the bright soft

eyes of his father's saddle horse. "You ride her some day, my dove," she promised the baby. Young Wes' could hold up his head and sit straight in his mother's arms. He was strong and sturdy, as big as a year-old child, and his eyes were bluer every day.

Allie Dean fought against Mareea taking the child out in the cold, among the beasts. "One of the horses might reach over and nip him, quick as scat. You don't act with a bit of sense about him, Maria."

But Mareea did not listen. There was always a battle between the mother and grandmother over the child; silent, constant determination on Allie Dean's side, indifference from Mareea punctuated by impatient outbursts when she made it plain that she was the child's mother, his supreme being, arbiter of his destinies, small and great, and that Allie Dean's services were unneeded, unwanted, and on scant sufferance.

There was no question in the child's mind which of the two he loved the more. He would lean and call to his mother, kicking his legs, beating his arms about eagerly to be with her. When she left him there was always a tempest if he was awake, and it would take Allie Dean a long time to pacify him. But she believed it was because he was so little and greedy. "When he's weaned and gets older so's I can reason with him," she thought craftily, "I'll soon teach him not to be so foolish."

She loved him abjectly. She would have done anything for him. She played for every small advantage—a few extra minutes of holding him, once in a long time giving him his bath, carrying him upstairs before

Mareea was ready, trying in every way to cheat his mother out of him, and yet to make it appear that she was only helping. Her restless, autocratic will plotted ceaselessly—to get the child, to oust Mareea. But save in the smallest ways she did not advance her aim. She tried to be patient, to wait and be ready. She was sure the girl would tire of the hard farm work, and she believed, with Miss Estella, that she would marry again. Then, somehow, Allie Dean must keep young Wes'. Oh, it would come! She knew it. The prayer of the righteous availeth. The Lord, in His own good time, would show her the way.

She made Berta uneasy. "She is an old witch-spinner. She sits there with the child, and spins spells in her mind. It is bad," she whispered to Mareea.

"Spin some spells yourself, then," said Mareea. "Don' let her make better spells as you."

"You will be sorry when she gets a bad spell on you, to hurt you," said Berta, offended.

"Look at me! There is nothing c'n hurt me, Berta, no more. I am hurt all over, to death, when my Wes' is dead."

"There is the child."

"She is crazy over the child. She'd die sooner as hurt him."

"Yes, but——"

"An' I can send her away any time I like. This is my home, my land."

"The young, they know all. And they know nothing." But Mareea had gone, unheeding. Berta shook her head.

Well, she must do what she could. In the new moon she would pull seven black hairs from Nicky's tail and tie them together, three one way, four the other, and lay them, with a few grains of salt, under the rug at Allie Dean's bedroom door. Such a cross had been known to make powerful spells quite harmless.

Chapter Twenty-One

FEBRUARY was as bleak as January, and March not much warmer, with high unfriendly windstorms, slashing rain, reluctant sun. But as if it knew better than the weather, a faint determined sprouting of green came out to greet a fair warm April and spread and flourish into May.

The eager, intense life of the fields penetrated into the house. Mareea flung up the blinds to the very top, hung back the ruffled curtains. Berta took pail and broom and brush and cloth, and scrubbed and rubbed everywhere in a frenzy of activity, singing to herself in a high tuneless humming like a busy bee in a bottle. Young Wes' grew heavier, more active, his red cheeks were rounder and redder, he learned to laugh aloud. Only Allie Dean was untouched. Thin, black-clothed, grim, she walked, a rigid fate, through the high tide of spring. But she was not untouched by it. It stirred her to an action she had long deferred.

She went to town and to see Squire Fiske, driven by her purpose, yet reluctant, because he had rebuked her for leaving her property to Lucy. Still, she trusted in him, in his honesty and discretion, as in no other of the town's lawyers. He would not lie to her, and he was close-mouthed; he revealed no one's secrets. When she

had said what she had come to say, he gave her a straight answer.

"If you had wanted to contest your son's will," he said, "you should have done so when it came up for probate. You can't do it now. Why, the fact that you've been living there with your daughter-in-law all winter, with her in possession and running the place, would nullify your plea, if it came to a court action."

"It's never seemed right to me," said Allie Dean, "that after all these years I should be set aside and made nothing of in my own house. There ought to be something I could do."

"It is not your own house any longer. But you have other property. There is no necessity for you to live under conditions which you do not enjoy," the Squire pointed out to her.

"If I went and lived to myself, when my daughter and my daughter-in-law both have good homes, I'd lay all of us open to criticism. There's been enough said already." From the Squire's silence she knew he found this flimsy. She brought out her true reason. "It's my duty to see that my son's child is brought up right."

"You believe, then, that your son's wife is incapable of taking proper care of the child?"

"She's no more fit than a barn cat! If I had the property I'd have some hold on the child. I could agree to leave it to him, provided his mother didn't interfere with his bringing up." It flashed into her eyes, her covetousness of the child, her hatred of Mareea. She leaned forward and put out her hand, clenched tightly.

"I've got no wish to bring family matters into court, I never did like washing dirty linen in public, I know what a nine days' talk it'd be—but I'm willing to do anything if I could get the right to take care of Wes's child.

"Mrs. Dean," said the Squire sternly, "you might contest your son's will in the courts until doomsday and you'd never get a decision in your favour. His property was legally left to his wife. As for your duty to your grandchild"—he began to question whether he was dealing with sanity, so spoke with caution—"there, of course, I cannot advise you. It seems to me that the only thing you can do is to live in amity with the child's mother, and influence both her and the child by affection and kindness to accept your views as to his upbringing—provided, of course, you are absolutely certain that they are for his best good."

She sat, digesting this. She was satisfied that he was right as to the legality of the will. She believed what he said, even though it was not what she wanted to hear. But when he talked about affection—and kindness—from her to *Maria?* That was blather! She saw that she had been a fool to come, that she was no further advanced than before, and she still needed an ingenious plan, a contrivancy of some kind to get the boy in her hands, separate him from his mother. Had she given herself away to the Squire? she wondered. He might warn Mareea against her. Well, then, she must use a contrivancy against him, too.

She dropped her eyes, her voice softened thoughtfully. "I think the world and all of that boy, Squire. I'd cut

my hand off before I'd do anything that wasn't for his best good. Probably you're right, he and his mother'll have to be led by affection and kindness. You've helped me a good deal, you've shown me a light. I see my way clearer from talking to you."

Squire Fiske had heard too many witnesses not to detect the accent of perjury when he heard it. There was something here that was false—yet in her declaration of devotion to the child there was truth. A fantastic note of alarm rang in his mind, but he silenced it. Allie Dean was too worthy a woman, too solid a member of the community to suspect of criminal intent. She disliked and distrusted her daughter-in-law, but that was natural, he could understand it. And she had loved her son tenderly, closely. It was natural also that she should want to bring up her son's child in the narrow way of her own knowledge and custom. But—there was something here he had not fathomed, that Mrs. Dean, good Christian and respected matron, was hiding from him anxiously.

Meditating these things, he felt that he, too, might use a contrivancy. "I take considerable interest in your son's wife," he said. "She is in a difficult situation, and she has been very courageous and intelligent in meeting it, so far. I keep an exceedingly close watch on everything that concerns her—an exceedingly close watch." He said the words weightily, and looked keenly at Allie Dean. "If you, Mrs. Dean, find it difficult to get her to listen to you—and you must allow that youth in general is disinclined to listen to older wisdom—if you

will confide in me wherein I might help you, it would give me much pleasure to serve you whenever our judgments coincided, which in the main they would be sure to do." There was conciliation and likewise plain warning that she'd better be careful, attempt no mischief on Mareea. He didn't imagine that she would attempt mischief, but there was something about her sudden change in manner that made him uneasy. But there—he was a fanciful old man! This woman was a Dean by marriage, a Saulsbury by birth. No bad streak in the Saulsburys, even if old Nate was as queer as Dick's hatband.

He could not tell how much Allie Dean had absorbed of his meaning. She got up and thanked him, and said good-bye, leaving him with the feeling that he had been outwitted, that she had got from him what she wanted to know, and had kept every inkling of her real purpose hidden from him.

It so disturbed the Squire that he put on his hat and followed her. He found her in the post office writing a letter at the public shelf. "Will you be kind enough to ask your daughter-in-law to come in and see me tomorrow?" said the Squire. "Or if it is not convenient for her to come, I could drive out to see her day after tomorrow, and I will do so."

"I'll tell her," said Allie Dean. She put her hand over the letter, though he had not looked at it, and could not have read a word of it without his spectacles. But she was leaving nothing to chance, and she had fully grasped that the Squire meant to protect Mareea. When he had

gone, she finished her letter, sealed it in an envelope, addressed it to Randall Covey, and dropped it in the mail box. This might succeed no more than her inquiry about the will, but with the movement and ferment of spring in her blood, she must move, too, she must try everything. The way would surely be opened to her.

She drove home slowly, thinking of the Squire and of Mareea and of the boy. "I've got a good twenty years before me," she thought, "I could bring up that child till he's voting age, and he'd be a credit and a comfort to me. But I can't do it unless I have the farm, or unless her mind's set elsewhere. If I had the farm I could make it a bait for her giving in and letting me train him. The Squire spoke truth and common sense when he said I was too late raising that question. But there's other ways. She's young, she's light-minded, she'll be after the men pretty soon. I got to begin.'"

She told Mareea that the Squire wanted to see her. "Some business or other, I reckon," she added. "He didn't say what." The Squire's message had signified nothing to Allie Dean. She knew he wouldn't tell Mareea that she'd consulted him about breaking Wes's will—and there was nothing else he could tell her that mattered.

Squire Fiske was unaccountably relieved when he saw Mareea come into his office, looking, in spite of her black dress and veil, so intensely alive, so sure of herself, so strong and young and handsome that Allie Dean's mysterious menace faded out beside her.

"I didn't want to see you about anything special, but it had been some time, and I wondered how you were getting along," he explained.

"Aw ri', I guess. The spring work is all of a rush. Yes, and you don' know what's happen. That ol' fella Perry come over to see me, talked very nice, says he'll sell me his little field. Says I could pay him all cash or give my note, he don' care."

"I don't see why you want that land so much. You have plenty of land now. You don't need that extra piece any more'n you need water in your shoes."

"Wes' was goin' to buy it. It makes the line all straight and square, nice straight line all around. I tol' Mist' Perry I give him seventy-fi' dollars, cash in his hand, but he stan' out f'r hunder' twenty-fi'. He went off shakin' his head. But he'll come back. An' look here. You know that corn I held on to, an' sold so high! I got the money now, an' I want to buy that tombstone for my Wes'. I can' put that off no longer. I want a fine one, not fancy, but big an' nice. I'll feel better when I can go see that Sundays." She looked at him appealingly.

"Buy it, by all means. I know how you feel. How is your boy?"

"Oh, he's beautiful, he's gran'. You never could think a baby would grow so fas', be so smart. He will walk, he will talk before so long!"

"Mrs. Dean is very devoted to him, isn't she?" He would find out if she was afraid, if she suspected.

Mareea smiled. "She would like to steal him from me. She is jealous that he loves me bes'. Berta says she is a witch an' makes spells against me."

The Squire put the tips of his fingers together. "You are not afraid?"

"But what of?"

"An overpowering affection, coupled with jealousy, sometimes leads to quarrels, unpleasantness."

Mareea spoke the safeguard the Squire had felt. "She is a mean ol' woman, an' she hates me, an' she would like to steal my boy, but—you know—she could not do somethin' quick an' wicked. She won' poison me, nor kill me nohow. She ain' that kind. I live beside her, an' Godlemighty knows it is hard, but I am never scare' of her like that. No, not one bit, ever."

It made Squire Fiske easier to have his vague fears set out in the open. "That's all right then. I only asked —well—no matter. How's your field hands doing?"

"We got the same two men as last year. An' you know Tom."

"You'll need an extra hand later, won't you?"

"No, I'm the extra hand. I do as much as a man."

The Squire frowned. "You ought not to work in the field. A woman is not strong enough. Besides, it is not customary, it creates a bad impression."

"You ever see anybody more well, more healthy as I am? Lotsa these pinched-in girls would be better to hoe an' dig every day. An' I can' stop for what people say about me—the people here don't like me anyway. I do nothin' to 'em, I mind my own business, I pay my way—

but they look at me funny, they kind of shy off from me. So I do what I like—an' I like to work on my own land."

"But surely it tires you too much."

"Not so much as sittin' with the dog an' the cat—an' Missis Din lookin' sour an' hatin' at me. No, I got to work outdoors. That way I get the feel of the land—I get to know it, what it needs. The land is like the cows and the horses; you mus' be with it, you mus' work for it, an' then you know it, an' it knows you."

The Squire made a last effort. "But the care of your garden should be sufficient. I do not approve of this work in the fields."

Mareea lifted her shoulders, her hands. "I don' want to make you mad at me, but it's no use. If I don' work hard every day, I'd jus' go crazy. I don' get tire', I don' get sick, I save a man's wages—but mos' of all it keeps me from thinkin' about my Wes'. Don' talk against me, *please*. It is so hard, it is so *hard* to be without my Wes'."

Her eyes swam in tears, her mouth and chin shook, her colour drained away, leaving her delicately pale, more gentle, entreating. The old Squire had never seen her so moved. "Good Lord, but she's a dainty morsel!" he thought. "And she's got real sensibility—it's no trumped-up stuff. Extraordinary young woman!"

She folded away her grief, would not let it master her now. She began to talk again of the farm and the work. The new creamery, should she buy stock in it? Were the men behind it honest? "I'd like to sell the milk without

the bother of cream an' butter," she told him. "They say there'd be skim milk for the hogs. I could put two, three more cows in the stable an' feed 'em, maybe more, come nex' year. But I don' want to run my head in no trap. Uncle Nate he thinks it's aw ri'."

After the creamery came the matter of the contract for tomatoes. It was rumoured that the cannery would offer a lower price. "Tomatoes is mean to grow, mean to pick, seems to me," said Mareea. "How about it if I used that land for more feed for cows, if the cannery does cut the price? I don' have to grow tomatoes—plenty things don' need so much work an' sell jus' as well."

When she had gone the Squire sat ponderously thinking about her: "If any young man had come to me and talked with as much sense and vision as she has done I'd have thought him the most progressive farmer in the county. Because she is a woman and young, with a pretty face and a soft voice, I find myself dubious, unbelieving. What difference is there? Why does sex influence me? It is only the method devised by our Creator for the continuance of the race, and has no greater significance. Yet when I see a woman who evidences a diligence and intelligence in work which are usually deemed masculine, I regard her as unnatural, a phenomenon. That is strange—and unfair. I shall be interested to see what progress she makes, what fate has in store for her. She should marry again." And then he stopped and wondered. "Now, why do I say that? All my life I have congratulated myself on being able to see the truth without the limiting prejudices and

stupidities of the town and county people. That young woman still sincerely loves and mourns the husband she has lost, and I, disregarding the rare beauty of such sentiment, say glibly she should marry again. Which is no better than suggesting that some other man should enjoy her femininity and her affectionate nature, a sort of deputized lust on my part since I am too old to enjoy them myself. But if I were a young man, I'd—I'd—by godfrey, David Fiske, I'm ashamed of you. You're a disgusting old scalawag."

Mareea had gone her way without any suspicion as to the Squire's meditations on her person and her future. She went to the post office and got the mail, a farm implement catalogue for herself and the Eden *Weekly Democrat*. On her way from the post office to the bank she passed Mr. Casper Nichols and was saluted by him with the respect due from a crafty person to one whom he has been unable to trick. At the bank she received quite another form of respect, the respect due to a good balance, consistently maintained. And the cashier, Clarence Halsey, said to Sid Dukes, the bookkeeper, after she had gone, "Somethin' about that woman always kinda stirs me up. I c'd look at her all day, doggoned if I couldn't." To which Sid replied blithely, "Your wife'd give a shout of joy to hear it."

From the bank Mareea journeyed to Newman's hardware store where a catalogue of granite and marble monuments might be seen. It did not take her long to choose, she knew exactly what she wanted; white marble with a cross carved on the top and an inscription

containing the words, "beloved husband of Maria Dean." That shut out his mother, Lucy, everyone but herself. The stone would stand there in the cemetery for all the world to look at, and they would know that he was her "beloved husband." Mareea told Fred Newman to hurry the order, hurry the putting up of the stone. Now that she had enough money to pay for it she could not wait.

From Newman's she went to the general store and bought sugar, stove polish, coffee, kerosene, crackers, a lamp wick, and a red-and-yellow rubber ball that caught her eye. Young Wes' would love that. He had few toys.

When her buying was done Mareea put her packages in the back of the buggy and drove uptown to the Lucases. Belle waved to her from the window and came to the door, kissed her. Mareea beamed with pleasure. "I jus' wanted to see you," she said. "You are like a bright light shinin' on me. Belle, I can' be so sad when I see you."

Belle kissed her again—she enjoyed feeling herself Mareea's benefactor. "How's the baby? You didn't bring him with you?" she asked.

"I guess you'd see him if I had him. I couldn't put him under the buggy seat. He's gran'—growin' so big! My soul, you got another new dress! It's a beauty."

"Nothing but a cheap challis I ran up to wear afternoons—I had to have something cooler than my winter dresses." The stuff was dark blue with pink roses and green leaves. Belle had bound its flounces with rose and

tied a rose ribbon round her throat. Mareea looked at her with appreciation.

"I'm an old black crow settin' beside of a rose bush," she said. "This veil's hot an' sticky on my neck an' it rubs off. Miss Estella says I should get me a thinner veil, but I don' want to spend the money."

"I don't see why not! What you saving for?"

"You'll see." She hugged to herself the secret of the stone and the "beloved husband." Even Belle must not know of it until it was in place.

"Now, don't you be an old miser. You work yourself pret' near to death in a perfectly ridiculous way. You ought to buy yourself some nice things; that's about the only pleasure you've got when you're in mourning."

Mareea smiled. "'S funny—everybody tells me what to do; the Squire, an' Miss Estella, an' you, an' Missis Din——"

"For pity's sake, don't pay any attention to *her!*"

"I don't pay attention to any of you. Belle, in this life we got to live alone an' only do the things that we know, inside of us, we mus' do."

Abstractions on life meant nothing to Belle. "Yes, I suppose so," she answered blankly. "Listen, Mareea, Ma wants to get about twenty quarts of strawberries from you soon's they're ripe. She told me to tell you next time I saw you. She wants to engage them ahead to be sure of 'em."

"Aw ri'. I'll remember. I'll send you word when they're comin'."

They had very little to talk about. Mareea was not

informed in local gossip and Belle thought the farm dull. The link between them was the gratitude Mareea offered to Belle for her kindness when Wes' died, and the good-natured pity—tinged with eternal curiosity—that Belle felt for Mareea as a helpless, forlorn, and inferior creature. Neither one had a clear idea of the realities of the other, though Mareea gauged Belle far more accurately than Belle could ever gauge Mareea. No fear of Belle ever seeing that Mareea possessed a keen brain, a relentless energy, a great sensibility. No, she was merely the poor Italian girl—pretty and taking with the men—whom Wes' Dean married, and in a year left a widow, and so hard put to get along that she worked in the field along with the hands, and had to have that awful old Mrs. Dean live with her! That was as far in understanding as Belle could go, but the effect was to keep her sympathy alive and to give Mareea a generous friendship.

Mareea stayed only a short time. She must get home to the milking. "You come see me, Belle," she begged. "'S nice in the country, flowers in the wood, little blue flowers, an' pink flowers on bushes, an' funny curled green flowers with black stripe!"

"I wouldn't go out in the woods now for anything. It's full of snakes."

And that amused Mareea so much that she smiled over it on the way home. Then she forgot it. She was thinking of that fine high white stone for Wes'. "My beloved husband," she whispered, "my beloved husband."

In the evening after supper she took out the ball and rolled it over the floor to the baby, to his great delight and excitement. Berta sat down on the floor to watch, as happy as the child. Only Allie Dean looked on with discouraging admonitions. "Do be careful, he'll topple over and get a bad bump," and, "It's not good to get a little child all wrought up just before he goes to bed—he'll be feverish," and, "He'll lick the paint and be sick, sure's anything." But Mareea paid no attention. It made Allie Dean furious. At last she went off to bed early, because she could not bear her jealousy any longer, nor to see the love between Mareea and the child. She lay awake in the dark and prayed that her hour of triumph might be no longer delayed.

She felt that her prayer had been heeded when Randy Covey replied to the letter she had written him. Very casually, she mentioned it to Mareea. "I heard from Randy. He says he's got some special seed potatoes and he'll drive over next Sunday and bring you some."

"I'd like some more seed potatoes," said Mareea, "but maybe he'll want too much money if his is so special."

"He's not aiming to sell—he wants to give 'em to you."

"Oh! Then I don' want 'em at all. People who give you somethin' always lookin' to get somethin' back. He can keep his ol' seed potatoes. Send him a letter an' say so."

"I can't do that. He means to be kind and nice and

he's a relation. You can't treat relations thataway. Lucy and Bob'll likely be over Sunday, too; it won't be any trouble having one extra to dinner."

"Oh, well——" Mareea's mind was rushing to the work outside. Randy Covey, present or absent, meant little to her. She sat down at the old desk and began, laboriously, to add thin columns of figures representing milk sent to the creamery.

Allie Dean held the baby and talked to him. "No, no, lovey, Mother's busy—you stay with Gran'ma. Gran'ma always got time to play with her little boy. Gran'ma loves her baby—look now—patacake——"

Her mind ran on railing maliciously against Mareea, pretending that she herself was innocent of subterfuge. "She knows what Randy's coming for, but she won't let on. She's ready for him. She don't want to wait till her first year of mournin's out." Then aloud: "That's right, lovey—play with Gran'ma—Gran'ma loves her lovey boy."

Chapter Twenty-Two

RANDALL COVEY walked decorously over the farm with Bob Tracy, following Mareea, Lucy, and Allie Dean. He had come before dinner, proffered his gift of seed potatoes, and had it received none too graciously.

"Maybe I got somethin' I could give you to take back," said Mareea; "some seeds of nice green-flesh cantaloupes maybe, or some little tomato plants. Tom's fix' the hotbed an' we got a lot."

"I didn't bring 'em to trade. I thought they were pretty good and you might be able to use 'em," said Randy, and he looked so crestfallen that Mareea slightly relented.

"Yes, well, I'm much oblige' but if I got somethin' here you can use, I'd like for you to have it," she said firmly. But she smiled at him, and so took the sting out of turning a gift into an exchange.

He could not take his eyes from her. He wished that she could lay aside her black weeds and put on the golden dress she had worn at Lucy's wedding. Ever since that day when he'd hung round her and tried to kiss her, she'd been in his blood. When she looked at him he didn't quite know what he was doing or saying. He would have liked to step up and walk beside her, but he

didn't quite dare. If only they could have taken this walk alone! Plague take Lucy and Bob and Cousin Allie—why did they all have to tag along!

He had intended to be helpful and advising to her about the farm, show her how she could depend on him, but to his chagrin there was no need. It was in better order and the early work more advanced than on his own land. He gave Mareea no credit for this. "That foreman of yours is mighty capable," he said.

"Yes, Tom's aw ri'," Mareea replied.

But when she said that she would plant no cannery tomatoes this year both Randy and Bob Tracy told her she was making a mistake. "Even if the cannery don't pay so much," Randy explained, talking down to her as to a child, "it's ready cash and the tomatoes come along when 'most everything else is done."

"'Sno use to plant tomatoes if what you get don' pay for the work and the fertilizer," maintained Mareea, unmoved. "I been figurin' it out. You'll go to lose money if you take what the cannery pays this year."

"You been figurin'." Randy could not help laughing with amiable condescension. "Now, how you ever goin' to figure out a thing like that?" The funny little soul, believing that she could figure on crops!

Mareea let this pass. Randy Covey was a nice boy maybe, but he didn't know much. She turned to Bob. "You buy any stock in the creamery?"

"Not me—I don't hold with these new-fangled mixed-up things. Pa and I talked it over and he said it was plain risky, and he didn't believe it'd make any head-

way. I hope you didn't buy any." He, too, talked down to her.

"I cert'n'y did. An' Uncle Nate Saulsbury, too."

"Say—that old man's in his dotage. O' course, you, not havin' any experience, might do a foolish thing like that, but he'd ought to know better. Why didn't you ask me about it before—you would've saved your money."

"It ain' lost yet," said Mareea.

"It's just the same as. Too bad, too bad! I wisht you'd've asked me." Bob shook his head mournfully.

"Maybe it'll turn out all right in time," said Randy, not because he thought so, but he wanted Mareea to look at him and smile again. "The one over in Queen Anne County's done real good, so I hear."

"Nothin' but dumb luck if it has," said Bob.

Lucy was pleased to see him so annoyed. Usually he had only flattering things to say of Mareea and what she had accomplished, far too flattering to suit Lucy's possessive wifehood.

"Maybe we have some more dumb luck over here," said Mareea. She had slight regard for Bob's opinions, good or bad. She had checked his displays of knowledge with facts and found that he believed many things true which she could prove were not. "But he's good enough for Lucy," was her final verdict. Only that he could not keep admiration from his voice and eyes when he talked to her kept Mareea from being bluntly rude to him often. The number of people who liked her was so small that she could not spare any of them.

When they had made their circuit of the farm and Lucy and Bob had started home, Randy made no move to go, though he had much farther to drive than they. Allie Dean said that walking so long in the sun had made her kind of giddy and she thought she'd lay down a spell. This left Randy alone with Mareea.

Usually he was glib enough with girls, but he didn't know what to say to this one. He couldn't make love to her yet—he'd have the whole family down on him. He must show due respect to Wes's memory. Still, he might make himself agreeable. He drew his chair near to hers, and prepared to do his best.

"I expect you get right lonely, don't you?" he asked.

"Not so much as in the winter. Now there's lots of work."

"It's a big job, carrying on a place the size of this. A heavy burden for a woman. You've done fine at it, you surely have. Still, it's a hard life for you. You don't get much of a good time."

"You have a good time, I bet. I bet you do."

Randy did not see how easily she had turned the talk from herself to him. "I don't miss much that comes along, that's a fact. This past winter I been to more'n twenty dances and near's many parties, and last fall I was at every shootin' match in thirty miles or more. Won first prize couple times."

"You a good shot, I bet."

"I don't want to make any brag, but I've helt my own with the best on the Shore more'n once." He

squinted down an imaginary gun barrel, pretending to aim.

"You a good dancer, too. Twenty dances! My, that's a lot!"

He laughed consciously. This was a delightful talk. "I never have any trouble finding partners. Say, don't you like to dance? Cousin Allie holds it's sinful, but I never could see it. I wisht I could take you to some dances——" He caught himself, remembering her mourning, adding lamely, "you know—some time."

"I don' never want to dance no more. Nobody can dance when the heart is heavy, Randy. Dancin' is for people all full of laugh and fun. I useta be so, but now, no more. Go on, tell me some more the nice things you do. You got a fast horse, you ride around a lot?"

"I got one o' the best horses in the whole State of Maryland. I'm goin' to enter him in a couple county fairs this fall—the races, I mean. He'll bring home the bacon."

"An' you got nice dog, nice huntin' dog? If you shoot so good I guess you go huntin', too."

"Say, I got the best bird dog in the world. That dog—why, if I was to tell you the things he's done you wouldn't b'lieve me. He's got's much sense as a man."

"Some men ain' got so much sense."

"That's a fact—listen to old Bob to-day. Acts like he knows everything there is to know—and he never was considered average bright!" Randy laughed loudly at his own humour.

Mareea was tired of him. "I got to go tend to the baby."

"Listen, don't go yet. We're havin' such a grand talk. I never had a real chance to talk to you before."

"Babies can' wait when they're hungry. My baby's got to be nurse'."

Randy blushed a painful red. A woman to talk to a man right out about nursing her child! Praise heaven his mother couldn't hear! And yet, it wasn't coarse, the way Mareea said it. He was divided between shame for her and tingling admiration for her boldness.

"I better be drivin' on home." He hoped she would ask him to stay.

But she didn't. Only his Cousin Allie appeared with such promptness that a sly mind might have wondered if she had been eavesdropping. She was warmly cordial. "Now why don't you wait and have some supper and drive home in the evening? It'll be so much pleasanter."

Her insistence made him uncomfortable, though he didn't know why. She overdid it. So he said No, he must get along.

"You'll come real soon again, won't you, Randy? This is a lonesome house, nobody but two lone women, so it'll be a real kindness to come. Maybe your mother'd make the effort and come with you another time." She went with him to his buggy, urging him, making his return seem a favour.

"'S funny, her actin' so struck on me all of a sudden, writin' and askin' me to come and beggin' me to come

again. Before Wes' died she was always tellin' me I was unregenerate and askin' me why I didn't join the church. I guess she feels pleasanter toward young fellas now," he thought, and added, "It makes it pretty slick for me, though, with Mareea!"

After he had gone Allie Dean began to praise him to Mareea. "Randy's improved such a lot. A nicer young man I wouldn't wish to see, so kind to his mother and thoughtful and open-hearted in his ways. Not a mean hair on his head. Don't you think so?"

"He's aw ri'."

"And he's so good-lookin'. I do like that way he has of throwin' back his head and laughin' and showin' his teeth so white and even. Shouldn't you say he was handsome?"

"Oh, I didn't notice. I guess he's aw ri'."

"And he's got no bad habits, Randy. A real good boy. Of course he likes to talk big and pretend he's wild, but they all go through that stage. It's just talk. Why, Wes' used to braggart around——"

Mareea's anger leaped at her. "You leave my Wes' alone! Don' talk about him the same way as Randy. Nobody was so good, so kind, as my Wes'. He was a man. That Randy—huh—he's nothin' but a green kid, an' he won't never be any more."

"Well, I must say! You've got no call to catch up Wes's own mother and instruct her speech. I know how good he was. I had him long before he knew you was in the world."

"Then don't talk about him like he was the same as that Randy."

She trembled with resentment and held the baby up before her that Allie Dean might not see her face. Never since the first outburst of her grief had she permitted Allie Dean to know how much she cared for Wes', and how she clung to each shred of his memory. Even now Allie Dean believed that she felt nothing but the wish to set herself up against her mother-in-law, pick holes in her behaviour. "It's just her ugly temper—she always wants to make me seem in the wrong," she thought. But she said no more of Randy at that time. She'd got him there, and got him interested in Mareea, and made it easy for him to come again. She must content herself with so much.

Randy Covey, driving home, was contented also. He'd made an impression! Nobody could tell him Wes' Dean's widow was pining away when she could ask so many personal questions of another man. She was dead set on finding out all about him. And why not? Wes' was a good enough fellow as fellows go, but he didn't have much go to him. He'd cooped up that pretty kissable girl—Randy licked his lips—out there on that farm, with his mother, and the only place they ever went was to church. Dull as ditch water! Randy was sure there was plenty of go to Mareea. Dress her up and start her out and she'd fly high. He wondered how soon he could go back without making it seem too plain that he meant to court her. He couldn't court her regular and proper before next fall, but if he appeared at the Deans' now

and then, and kept her fancy on him, why, he'd be in first place and any fellow who wanted to cut him out would be too late. There'd be plenty of fellows after her. Plenty! But he'd have the advantage. Of course, he wasn't afraid that any man alive could cut him out with a girl he was courting in dead earnest. All the same—all the same, it wouldn't hurt to lead the pack.

He wished that Mareea had no child. But there—the poor little chap! No use bearing him a grudge for being in the world. Being Wes's boy he'd be a good sort, like Wes' was. And the farm had been left to Mareea, not to the child, so there would be no tiresome dealing with guardians and trustees. An odd and pretty woman, with a generous slice of property—what more could any man desire? It was enough for Randy Covey.

His mother wouldn't much like it. She didn't want her Randy to marry. She found fault with every girl he'd ever fluttered about. But in the end she'd give in. A little peevishness, a few tears—these were nothing to worry an only son.

He thought of possession of Mareea; his eyes shone, he slapped his knee. She should have silk dresses and hats with long waving feathers, they'd go driving off to dances and fairs, they'd give a barbecue every year, with a beef roasted whole and plenty of hard cider and applejack. He'd soon stop this nonsense of her working in the field and figuring on crops. There was an old rhyme of his childhood that fell in with his mood and he sang it—shouting out the words so that his startled horse broke into a gallop and had to be quieted.

"'Curlilocks, curlilocks, wilt thou be mine?
Thou shalt not wash dishes nor yet feed the swine,
But sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam
And feast upon strawberries, sugar, and cream!'"

He must remember to tell her that when he went regularly courting. She'd think he was wonderful. In the picture that Randy's young male imagination painted Mareea was very grateful for his attention, a sweet and pliant doll for him to decorate and enjoy. "Well, I've gone with a lot of girls in my time," he sighed happily to himself, "but she takes the cake. There never was a girl before that I couldn't forget about, some of the time—but she sticks right with me, every minute. My Lordy, I wisht this waiting time was over!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

SPRING melted into summer on the Dean farm with a slow deepening of sunshine, a riper warmth, the full tide of leafy green flowing over fields and orchards. Great things happened. In June Mr. Perry capitulated and took seventy-five dollars for the coveted triangle of land. Squire Fiske went with Mareea to record the deed, and she was so dignified and serious at the county clerk's office that the Squire laughed within. And in June she had her first money from the disputed creamery, which was slowly working toward stability.

More important, far, far more important—in June the monument to Wesley Dean, "Beloved husband of Maria Dean," was set in place, and though she could not look at it without crying, it gave Mareea a strange, fervent happiness.

Allie Dean was sharp to her about the monument. "About time!" she said, "I dare say people thought there never was going to be a mark at Wes's grave."

"It isn't there for what people say," replied Mareea. "It is there because I love him." She did not know that Allie Dean intimated to her friends that she had paid for the stone, and that the inscription testified to her magnanimity. "I always say a man who leaves a wife ought to have it marked on his stone, whether or not

she cares about it." That was easy to say, it wasn't a lie.

And in June young Wes' took his first step alone—from his grandmother's clutching hands to the outstretched arms of Mareea, who received him with rapture. "A big boy—a great big boy! Soon he run everywhere with his mother," she cried, hugging him. Allie Dean sat silent, brooding. Oh, if she could only get him away—soon!

The crops flourished, and all the land had the cared-for, prosperous look that comes from stout fences, trimmed hedges, and no dowdy tangle of briers and weeds and shoots of sassafras and pokeberry fringing the field's edge.

"Seems like she's got a special sense about the work," Tom Bowers told his wife. "We ain't got a growing thing on the place but it's a week ahead of anybody in the neighbourhood. I'd most as lieve take her judgment as my own." This was the highest praise Tom Bowers could bestow. He continued thoughtfully: "She's had luck, too. Lookit that hailstorm the last o' May—went right over the Perry place and cut pret' near everything to ribbons, and never touched us. Lookit how the hawg cholera's been ragin' all around, and nary one of our hawgs but's in the best o' health and sperrets. The early chickens done first rate, too. O' course, she keeps right after everything, I'll say that for her. Outside o' runnin' the plough and the cultivator, she does as much work as Wes' ever did."

"Oh, Tom, hush up your mouth," interposed Cora Bowers weariedly. "Any woman could do the same if

she'd go out and act the same onwomanly way Mis' Wes' does."

"A little more onwomanly actin' wouldn't hurt the farmin' none in this community, 's all I got to say. You don't even keep the garden half weeded, an' a hoe's pizen to you."

Mrs. Bowers ignored this. "I think you're right down bewitched with her. An' I don't like it. Come right down to it, she ain't nothin' but trash."

"Don't you talk like a plumb idjit. I don't want nothin' from her but my wages and fair treatment, and I get 'em. She ain't lookin' at no man the way you think. An' if she does, there's young Covey at her beck and call. Yes, and I see several others takin' full notice. Why did Ollie Trice come all the way from Greensboro to buy sweet-potato plants? Why'd Kil Prendergast drive out twicet to persuade her she'd ought to sign up with the cannin' factory? He didn't use no such persuasion on nobody else. One of 'em's a bachelor, and one of 'em's a widow man, that's why. And there'll be a-plenty more. You women all got your knife out for Mis' Wes' because she's so doggoned much better lookin' than you are, an' so doggoned much smarter, too, when the truth's told. But I tell you, Cora, like I said before, she ain't seekin' for no man, and she behaves herself a good deal better and more sensible than lotsa women hereabouts who're too high'n mighty to say a good word for her. Cannin'-house girl she may be, but there ain't nothin' trashy about her."

Tom had seen her truly. Mareea was not seeking for

any man. Prendergast and Trice and the other males who came to look over Wes' Dean's widow were surprised and somewhat offended by her offhand manner. She should have been shy, hesitating, rolling her big eyes coyly. Instead she asked Trice a stiff price for the potato plants and stuck to it, refusing to dicker, and she dismissed Kil Prendergast with the frank remark that he might fool other farmers into making starvation contracts, but not Mareea Dean.

Randall Covey came on another basis, more familiarly, as kin, with the claim of blood. And he was a funny kid, he made her smile, almost laugh sometimes, with his effervescence, his swagger. She liked him, though she soon was bored by his presence, but it didn't occur to her that he had any idea of marriage. She felt so much older, so much more mature and experienced that he did not seem to her a man grown, or to be treated as one. He came often now, because Allie Dean urged him to do so—mostly out of Mareea's hearing—and the household grew accustomed to him. He took on himself little duties and chores, easily, like a young brother; he soon ceased to be "company." One day Mareea took him out to the cemetery with her, and showed him the stone to Wes', and he helped her mend the sod of the grave and put a bunch of white peonies on it. "That looks nice, don't it, Randy?" asked Mareea, "the white flower, the white stone?"

He did not see how her eyes lingered on the words "beloved husband," he did not hear the yearning in her voice. He merely thought she was doing the right thing,

and he wouldn't have her do less. It made her sweeter to him that she didn't neglect Wes's grave. A woman, for Randy, should be sentimental and grieving—not to excess, but enough to let him console her. He was pleased with Mareea's tender-heartedness, it was fit and proper. And he felt that he had made a long stride in her favour when she let him go with her to Wes's grave. "I'll bet she'd never think of taking any other fellow there," he thought exultantly. She had linked him with her deepest emotion.

But how deep that emotion was Randy had no least conception. Wes' was never out of Mareea's mind, nor was his memory dulled. She loved him dead as she had come to love him when he was at her side. Regret and longing for him held their sharp edge for her, insensibly they softened her, gave her dignity. The problems he left for her sharpened her wits, developed her abilities. The outdoor work she did made her colour bloom brown-rose, kept her down to bone and muscle, but without gauntness, and strangely enough she had grown taller, a full inch. So a new beauty came to her, from within and without, and Randy, looking at her, felt that time stood still, and he could never wait until the year of her mourning was out. He began to wonder if he need wait so long. Cousin Allie had hinted, more than once—but, of course, Cousin Allie wasn't everybody. He'd never quite fathomed Allie Dean's cordiality—though he admitted that it came in mighty handy for his purpose.

Some instinct warned him to be cautious, not to rush, even when he most desired it. He had seen Mareea's

temper flash out, and though he would never have acknowledged it, he feared to have it directed toward himself. For the first time in his life Randy's self-assurance was wanting. Mareea was not like the girls he had hugged and kissed and played with and ridden blithely away from. She had a way, just when he thought she was most taken with him, of destroying his confidence with a word, a look. This, too, he would not have acknowledged, his conceit would not permit him, but it influenced his behaviour.

Through the net of his feeling with which he longed to trap her, and through the darker, colder snare set for her by Allie Dean, Mareea went unaware, her days even and commonplace. She was learning, she wanted to know how to do everything, her quick intelligence pounced on all that would serve her needs. She began with Squire Fiske's help, but against his counsel, to keep rudimentary accounts of the farm. These were very hard for her, because she had had little schooling, but she could add and subtract, and she could write down every cent she spent and every cent she took in. At night she would puzzle over these, because she saw at once that they did not mean anything exact. The milk she sold at the creamery, for instance, was paid for in cash. Very well. The butter she took to the general store was "traded out" in house necessities—this was harder to appraise. But to balance against these items the cost of cattle feed—it was her own hay, her own fodder, yes, and the bran was ground at the mill from her own wheat —this led her back to the price of labour, fertilizer,

implements. She wandered into a thousand questions impossible for her ignorance to answer. Perhaps Wes' had been right—if you have money at the end of the year, you are a good farmer. If you haven't, you are a poor one. But something in Mareea's acquisitive, restless brain teased her for greater accuracy. She was heartened by finding that on some crops she could collect real knowledge of cost, but the chickens, the cattle, the pigs, the work teams—these were almost incalculable. She discovered, also, that Squire Fiske, for all he was old and wise, couldn't answer such questions as: "If I feed the chickens the wheat an' corn that's no good an' couldn't be used any other way, then their feed costs me nothin'—is it so?" and, "Should I charge the stable manure that's spread on the fields to the credit of the cattle, or to the costs of the hay, or whatever I put it on?"

"The whole county'd ha-ha its head off if they heard us talking," said the Squire after one such interview. "My advice is, take the big general items, the things you can get hold of and know, keep those straight, and let the little things go. You can't chase every penny."

Mareea eyed him doubtfully. "Chasin' pennies is what counts in farming. You can' slap-dash money around without knowin' you'll get it back."

But for the time she decided to follow the Squire's advice. Later on, as she grew more apt at calculating, more used to main costs, she would try to frame some system of keeping tab on the smaller, more intangible expense. She could use her energy, burn it in that way.

The Squire was old, he liked to doze in his little office, he had no life to spare for keen hunting of snips and scraps. But Mareea's life and youth brimmed over, fretted her, and must be employed. She had the farm in good command, now, and the house.

Allie Dean waited, watched, fretting also, like a hawk balked of a bird in the bushes, but concealing it. Like Randy Covey, she found the time of waiting long. Still, she had young Wes' a good many hours of each day, while Mareea was out. Her passion for him grew greater; much of the time she thought of him as her own, and planned definitely what she would do with him, once rid of Mareea. He was to her the most beautiful, the cleverest, the unparalleled in the annals of babydom.

By the time July was half over young Wes' could take two steps alone. He made sounds that were very like words. They took the place of words, for with them and and a demanding hand he could make his three slaves understand all that he wished and required. He was tall for his age, but no more fat than his mother, and the blue of his eyes had deepened to sapphire. He did not cry unless he was angry, and he was only angry when he tried to do something that he could not yet accomplish. Then he would roar with rage, and if Mareea was not there Allie Dean would fly to pet and comfort him—she would not let Berta come near him. When Mareea was in the house the boy would have nothing to do with either of the others. And Mareea, seeing him grow in understanding and affection for her, began to care for him more devotedly, talking to him of all that was in

her own thoughts and feelings as if he were old enough to understand her. He would listen so earnestly it often seemed as if he did understand.

Allie Dean said it was silly to talk to a little child in such a way. "It's not right. He'll turn into one of these queer young ones if you don't stop. You'll addle his brains."

Mareea and young Wes' paid no attention to the scolding old woman, and she could only go back to her eternal malevolent waiting and watching. She read her Bible, prayed, and told herself that young Wes', if he didn't see his mother for a while, would soon turn to his grandmother alone. Once she proposed to take him with her for a visit to Lucy, but Mareea would not hear of it. "You go along if you want, but my baby stays with me," she said. "He's too little to be away from his mother."

"A change'd do him good," persisted Allie Dean. "He's looking kind of peaked these hot days, and his gums is all feverish. Lucy's house is cooler than this."

"No, he's not goin'," said Mareea. And Allie Dean, baffled, drew off once more.

Over his first intelligible word another altercation arose. Allie Dean declared that he had said distinctly, "Gram-ma," Mareea equally sure that it was, "Ma-ma." When they tried to get him to repeat it he merely sucked in the corners of his mouth mischievously and kept a stubborn silence. At that Allie Dean cried out strangely, "That's just what his father used to do when he was little," and Mareea ran out because she could not

bear it that Wes' should not see his son, so like him, so dear—and she did not want Allie Dean's cold eyes on her distress. If Allie Dean was jealous of young Wes's love for his mother, so Mareea was jealous of all the years Allie Dean had had the boy's father, her Wes', her beloved husband. It was unfair, unjust, that her own time with him should have been so short and his mother, who did not cherish nor prize his memory, should have had all the years before.

"She had him that long time, and now she wants my boy," thought Mareea bitterly. "She wants him to spite me, she wants him to love her best that my feelings will be hurt." She misread Allie Dean's outpouring of love to the child as Allie Dean in turn misread Mareea's clinging to her son as no more than a desire to spite and injure her, his grandmother. Neither woman would give the other credit for a larger, finer feeling; all was warped and twisted between them.

The summer went its accustomed round: hay-cutting, harvest, threshing, cultivating corn and the potato fields Mareea had insisted on planting instead of tomatoes, incidental gathering and marketing of summer apples and peaches and melons—another of her notions—ploughing under the black-eye peas, and the constant care of the creamery milk, the flock of chickens, and the peevish, troublesome turkeys. Mareea had been impressed by the price of turkeys the year before. Little crops, broom corn, buckwheat, pumpkins, late cabbage, had been tucked about here and there, some of them on the land bought from Perry, and some on other odd cor-

ners where regular tillage was not feasible. Most of these Mareea planted and took care of herself, driven by that instinct of the Italian peasant that fills every two-foot terrace on the steepest, highest hill with fruitful growth.

As the heat and languor of the days increased Allie Dean's tension grew more taut, more chafing. She looked for Randy's comings with impatient eagerness, spied on his meetings with Mareea, hiding and eavesdropping so openly that she was almost caught a dozen times. She was desperately eager. It seemed to her that Randy was hanging back a little, holding off. She tormented herself by wondering if he had changed his mind, if some other girl had drawn away his light and fickle purpose. It would have delighted her beyond measure to have Mareea marry anyone, but it suited her cooler reasoning best to have her marry Randy. She did not want to see the farm go out of the family altogether. Better to have Randy in Wes's place than a stranger; she judged shrewdly Randy's egotism would not enjoy the constant presence of Wes's child, though she did not think he would be unkind. And with this marriage there would surely be other children. These would take Mareea's attention, and little Wes' would be crowded back, crowded into his grandmother's waiting, absorbing care! In her head she had worked it out again and again according to her own desire, until she had come to believe that it could not possibly happen in any other way. Mareea must jump at Randy. "She wants a man —she's nothing but an animal. If it isn't Randy, she'll be picking up with another pretty soon," thought Allie

Dean contemptuously. She overlooked all possibilities of failure, shut her eyes to them. She had set her will and her wish on this thing, and it must be so.

But now—was Randy crying off? He had not been coming so often, and when he did come he seemed almost afraid of Mareea. He did not joke with her so much, did not boast and swagger and strut as before, to impress her. Allie Dean wanted to shout at him, to whip him on. This dealing with fools!

The reason for Randy's change of front was different from Allie Dean's guess. There was no other woman. There was only too much Mareea. He cared so much for her that he was afraid to reveal it, afraid to put it to the test. He was aware that he didn't dazzle her as he had believed at first, that perhaps—perhaps—an all too slippery "perhaps"—she didn't realize what a splendid fellow and how great a catch he was. He reached the pitch of wishing that Wes' had left her penniless for him to rescue from poverty. Randy did not express it, but he was discovering how great a drawback to an ardent suitor the economic independence of woman may be.

So, although her year of mourning was out and he might court Mareea if he meant to, he was unmistakably hanging back. He could not help himself. Suppose she should say "no"—and mean it! A lump in his throat made him gulp with terror at the bare suggestion. To be sure, if she did say "no" he could ask her again, and again, and again. He could wear her down with persistence, with constancy. He teetered backward and forward, and was restless and short in speech and so lost

his appetite that his mother wanted to dose him with a tonic. Half a dozen times he was on the point of speaking, and then his glibness, his poise would desert him and his tongue would be tied, and he would be silent and miserable, cursing himself for a dunce. He could only sigh and gloomily roll calf's eyes at Mareea. He was miserable when he was away from her, and more miserable when he was with her. And she didn't even see there was anything the matter with him, never gave him the lead of a solicitous question! He pitied himself heartily. Poor Randy, poor Randy, the brave, gallant blade—that he should come to this!

Chapter Twenty-Four

By the time the fodder was pulled and the corn was ready to cut, young Wes' was driving the household frantic by his newly acquired trick of walking as far as he could, then, when he toppled over, as he inevitably did, creeping very fast until he found something stable by which he could pull himself erect and go on walking. He made surprising distances by this simple alternation of progress. He reached the public road, he penetrated to the garden, he rambled back to the barn, to the fields beyond the barn. His small, active, bright figure was as elusive as a silver fish! Nicky followed him anxiously and kept him from approaching too near to horses and cows, but that was all that Nicky could do. Berta proposed to tether him with a rope, but his grandmother would permit no such indignity to the liberties of her darling. It gave her the more excuse to stay with him, to watch him, and if he escaped her to run after him and carry him back, delighting in his weight and struggles. She was consumed with fears for him. Mareea, too, was anxious, but Allie Dean's worrying drove her to the opposite attitude.

"He'll get down to the road again, and gypsies will steal him, or somebody'll drive over him," fretted his grandmother.

"Nobody's goin' to drive over a child," protested Mareea.

"You know plenty of the darkies go to sleep on their wagons—they'd never see him."

Mareea determined that the gate should be kept shut, but she would not give Allie the satisfaction of knowing it.

"You take no real care for the child," went on Allie passionately. "All you care about is traipsing out to the fields and selling stuff to make money."

"Don' talk like a fool," commanded Mareea.

What with the boy's escapades, and Randy Covey's seeming delinquency, Allie Dean's nerves were frayed and sore. "You're the fool yourself with a child like this, not to take proper care of him," she retorted. "But when did you ever have a mother's feelings? You've not got it in you. Shaller as a saucer—that's you. You're only deep and cunning when you want to get round somebody to your advantage——"

But Mareea refused to carry the quarrel further. "You mus' be outa your min'," she said, "you go on so wil'. No wonder the boy run away from you. When he gets a little bigger he won' be able to stan' the sight of you if you holler and act so mean all the time."

She shrugged the matter away, went to her work. But her words stayed with Allie Dean and frightened her. What if the boy should turn against her! What if he should not want to be with her! What if Mareea, after all, should keep him! It turned her sick. She ran to find young Wes', secure for the time in his morning's

nap, and sat beside him in a new agony. "Oh, lovey, lovey," she mourned, "my little boy, my darling little boy—your gran'ma loves you! Don't you ever let your mother make you think your gran'ma don't love you. Your gran'ma only wants to do what's best for you, to give you a chance to grow up to a good man. You'll never have a chance here!" She drifted to prayer once more, but her prayer had changed from the demand of one of God's elect to the supplication of blind, bargaining abjectness. "Only this one thing, Lord, and I ask nothing more. Thou hast scourged me with sorrow, Thou hast humbled and chastised me. Give me but this child to lighten my old age, to redeem my uselessness. I promise Thee to teach him Thy way, to make him Thy servant, even as I. O Lord, grant me this last labour in Thy vineyard. I ask it only for Thy greater glory, and for the sake of this poor innocent who will be no more than a pagan beast if he is left to his mother!"

Young Wes', waking, found her kneeling at his side. He thought it was a game and laughed, and his greeting lightened her heart. The child *did* love her. He loved her more than, or at least as much as, his mother! She knew it. She devoted herself to playing with him, and when Mareea came in she was calm, acting as if there had been no words between them. And when that afternoon Miss Estella Swann, having commandeered a ride with a passing neighbour, arrived on a surprise visit, there was no sign in Allie Dean's face of the recent tempest.

Miss Estella had come with a purpose. She had brought Mareea a hat. "You can't wear that bonnet and

veil any longer," she said, "but I knew you'd never get a hat for yourself. Now this is just the thing for second-year mourning. It's black and it's plain, and it's not going to cost you a cent above what I paid for it, but you've got to take it. It'll look real good on you."

It did look good on Mareea. Shadowed by the drooping brim, her eyes were spots of velvet, her small head became coquettish, smart. Miss Estella stepped back in admiration. "It's got real style—blessed if it hasn't! I hadn't any idea it'd be such a go. Don't you say a word—I'm going to pack your bonnet and veil away in a band-box in the garret. They'll come in handy to lend somebody who needs one sudden. And you've got to wear this. I'm goin' to stay over to-morrow and look at what your clo'es needs, and the next day'll be Sunday and you and me'll go to church together, and you can leave me in town for I've got to sew at Mis' Lucas's on Monday—and you'll wear this hat!"

She gabbled away, her high-coloured presence and her fast-wagging tongue making the house brighter, livelier. She begged Berta to make her a raisin pie and a cake with nuts in the icing. She seized on young Wes' and tickled him into spasms of hilarity. She told all the neighbourhood gossip she had heard and some she had surmised, and she bounced upstairs and down, poking into closets, sewing and mending and giggling and chattering, until even Allie Dean forgot for an occasional moment her rigorous purpose, and when Sunday morning came she said with truth that she hated to see Miss Estella go.

But she was content to stay at home from church, and see Mareea and Miss Estella drive off, because it gave her two hours alone with young Wes'. Mareea, against Miss Estella's protests, had determined to neglect church, but she wanted to take the early chrysanthemums to the cemetery, and she was glad to do it alone. Miss Estella was vehement: "I wanted you to wear that hat into church. You look a picture in it, you honestly do. People's eyes would bug out at sight of you."

"Nobody there wants to look at me, nobody I want to see. An' I don' like that ol' Cameron's buzz-buzz-buzz like a bee agains' the window."

"He is sorta prosy, I'll admit. But that's not the point. You'd oughta have some proper vanity—and if you've not got it, I've got it for you. I want folks to see how pretty you look, considerin' I picked out the hat."

"I kinda thought maybe it was one for me an' two for you, all this talk," said Mareea. "Maybe you want to wear my hat yourself, if you so vain. Come on, get in the buggy, or you won' hear the firs' of ol' Cameron's buzz-buzz-buzz."

They drove away, but in a little while there was the sound of wheels again outside, and Allie Dean went to the door, wondering if anything had brought them back. She could have sung for joy when she saw Randy Covey. He had not been there for two weeks. She flew out to meet him.

"Well, if you're not a sight for sore eyes! Where've

you been keepin' yourself? Maria said this very morning that you'd forgot us entirely."

"She said that?" asked Randy brightening. Then: "Oh, I guess she didn't mind much."

"She said a good deal more'n that, and if you'd heard her you'd know she minded. But I'm not goin' to tell on her." She began to plot, her head whirled with sudden notions. "Come along in—Maria's away but she'll be home real soon. She's only taking Miss Estella into town." She did not mention Mareea's other errand. "My, but she'll be glad to see you!"

She went on glibly, inventing as she talked. "I was only waiting for Maria to come back to take me over to Great-uncle Nate's. Mr. Perry come over and told me he'd heard through one of his hired men that the old man's down with lumbago, and I was kind of worried. I thought I'd ought to go over and see him—for all he's so crabbed and cranky, he's my own uncle."

Yes, she would efface herself, she would leave Randy a clear field. Perhaps her spying and listening had been a blight on his intention. If he was left alone with Mareea, entirely alone, he ought to make some headway in his suit. She'd give him every chance.

"Why, Cousin Allie," said the unsuspecting Randy, "I'll take you over—if you'll let me use one of your teams. I don't like to push my horse any further."

"Now, that's just like you, Randy, always kind and thoughtful. If you'll harness Doll to the old buggy I'll drive over myself. Then if I'm needed I can stay all day, and Maria won't have any disappointment about seeing

you. She'd be real put out if she found you'd come and gone without seeing her."

Randy was pleased. He had come uncertainly, unable to keep away any longer. He began to feel that he had done the right thing in staying away a little and letting Mareea miss him. She'd appreciate him now. And the sooner Cousin Allie got off the place the better. He hurried down to the barn, and hurried back with Doll and the old buggy. Cousin Allie was waiting, with her hat on, for she was as impatient to be gone as he was to dispense with her. She wanted to take the boy with her, but decided it might be better to leave him, for Mareea might be angry and come after him.

"You be sure and stay all afternoon," was her parting word to Randy. "It's mighty lonely for her at the best of times, and she don't enjoy any company like she does yours."

"O God," she prayed, as she drove away, "let this coil come to an end in my favour."

Randy was more than ever sure that he'd been clever to stay away, and clever to come. He knew, he thought, just how to handle women! He felt gay and daring and assured, his old self. Out in the kitchen he found Berta and talked to her jovially. Then he took young Wes' on the porch in the sunshine and romped with him there to the boy's great delight. It was so Mareea found them when she returned.

Randy saw instantly that she had laid aside her widow's bonnet and veil. It was the best of omens, the way was open to him now, for this could only mean that

she knew, and was proclaiming to the world, that her season of deep mourning was over and she was free to be approached as any other unattached woman. And oh, how beautiful she was, how she drew him! He came toward her exultantly, young Wes' in his arms, tumbled and tousled and laughing.

"Looks like you been havin' fun here," said Mareea, laughing with them.

"You bet we been having fun. Say, this buster's getting out of my class—he can pret' near whip me. I never saw a little fellow so strong and wiry for his age."

He could have said nothing more pleasant to Mareea. "He's a gran' boy," she agreed. "Lift him on the seat an' I'll ride him down to the barn with me."

But Randy held tight to the boy and stepped in beside her with him. "D'you think I'm goin' to let you unharness this team yourself?"

"I mos' always do."

"Not to-day you don't, nor any day when I'm on hand." He felt tall and powerful and protecting.

"Aw ri," smiled Mareea. "I never do no work anybody'll do for me."

When he came in from the barn, dinner was ready and he sat down with Mareea, looking across at her possessively. This was the way it should be—he and she at table together, but at his table, not at hers. To be with her thus made him confident, and wildly gay. He chaffed Berta, who waited on them, until she was almost overcome with laughing and telling him to hush up and go along! And he made Mareea laugh, too, he was so fool-

ish, and had so many jokes and funny speeches. Allie Dean's absence was grateful to them all; they breathed easier without her blighting eyes. Young Wes', tired from his romp, had his dinner and went to sleep. There was nothing to distract Mareea's attention from Randy.

After the meal he urged her to come out on the porch. "It's as warm as August out there." She was beginning to be tired of his jokes and funniness and loud laughter, and had stopped paying close attention to what he said. She leaned back in the porch rocker and half closed her eyes. "Hope Unc' Nate's not bad sick," she said irrelevantly. "I'd be sorry."

"Say, stop thinkin' about other people," burst out Randy. "Think about me some, why don't you?"

Mareea turned her head with bored indulgence. "What shall I think about you, Randy?"

It was the spark to light his flame. He dropped down beside her, and seized her hand, her arm. "Think about me that I'm crazy about you, that I got no peace of mind for seein' your eyes and dreamin' about you. Think about me that I love you more'n a man ever loved a woman——"

She gave him a vigorous rude push. "Oh, for goodness sake, don' talk like that!"

But she could not stop him; he could not stop himself. "Listen to me, Mareea—listen to me. I love you so much I'm pret' near out of my head. I want to marry you. I'd be a good husband to you, indeed I would, and I'd be a real father to the boy. He wouldn't make no difference to me—I love you so——"

She jumped up and put the chair between them, evading his grasp. "Don', Randy, for goodness' sake, stop—I——"

"Maybe I rushed you a little too much, maybe I've spoke too soon—but I couldn't help myself, seeing you so beautiful and so lonesome here and nobody to take care of you and me just aching in every bone to comfort and protect you. I'm crazy about you. I'd never look at another girl. I don't want no other girl but you——"

"*No!*"

"But, Mareea—you don't mean—you can't——"

"I mean *no!* You heard me!"

Her blazing determination sobered him, brought him a little way out of his madness. He dropped to a quieter key, persuasive. "But look here, Mareea, what's the matter with me? I'm a good fellow, I've not been any wilder'n most young chaps, honest I've not. And I'd quit anything you didn't like. And it's no use, I got to have you—I can't get along without you. I been off my head about you ever since the first time I saw you when you was Wes's wife——"

"I'm Wes's wife still, you big fool!"

He gaped at her. "Don't talk ridiculous. Wes's been dead over a year, and the Lord knows I've waited more patient than any man of my nature could be expected to. Wes' wouldn't've wanted you to live alone with nobody to look out for you and the boy——"

"You listen, you Randy. I'm Wes' Dean's wife and nobody else's. I wouldn't take another man for a gift,

not if he was a lot better and nicer than you even! You talk about bein' a father to my boy—Wes' Dean is my boy's father, an' the only father he's goin' to have, ever. I don' need nobody to look out for me, to protect me! Why, I think you gone right crazy."

"I am crazy—I'm so crazy I don't know what I'm doin' or sayin'. Mareea, darling pretty, don't be hard on me, don't talk so cross and stand off and look at me like I was a poison snake. It's no crime to love a woman, is it? If it is I'd oughta be in the pen this long time. You can't go on thisaway, livin' here runnin' this big farm. It's a man's job. You'll lose ever'thing Wes' left you. Then there wouldn't be anything for the boy. Don't you see how much you need me? I'd take *care* of you, and the boy, too. Why, he'd be a lot better off with a man to control and dis*cip*line him when he's a little older——"

Mareea turned scarlet with fury. "You control my boy! You can' control yourself! You run my farm? My farm is better cultivate' an' has better crops this minute than yours! You're a lot more likely to lose your farm than I'm to lose mine. An' I would no more let my boy into the hands of a silly swell-head kid like you, I'd ruther see him lyin' in the grave with his father. Get away from here, you Randy, an' don' you come back. I don' want to see your face around here again and hear your foolish talk. I despise you! I wouldn't marry you if you was covered with gol' an' di'monds and was as smart as you think you are. Now—you und'stand that? Mus' I say it all over again?"

She ran into the house, banged the door shut and

locked it. Randy stood staring, as angry as she, and raised his hand unconsciously to his face, feeling that she had struck him. At the sound of the turning key he turned, raging, slammed down the porch steps, and strode off to the barn where he harnessed in a rage so blind that he had difficulty adjusting the buckles and straps. Once in his buggy, he cut the horse with the whip and galloped down the lane. His vanity seethed and sizzled! The spitfire, the shrew! He had been so eager to marry her, he had fairly crawled before her, begging her, coaxing her, imploring her. He hoped every crop on the whole damned farm would rot and that she and her brat would be in the poorhouse before Christmas. He wouldn't care—it would be what she deserved. Wes' Dean might be glad and thankful that he was not alive tied to such a she-devil. Likely it was her temper that had caused Wes's death. Insulted, ordered off by a bit of cannery scum, a girl no better than she should be, who'd played on Wes' Dean's feelings and euchered him into marriage. The dirty low wench! Randy went from one incoherent evil and malicious imagining to others yet more evil and malicious. He heaped epithets on Mareea, taking such satisfaction as he could from unheard invective. If he'd only thought of them all in time to fling them at her!

Mareea was but little less angry than he. She had liked Randy well enough, he was young and comic and pleasant to have about for short whiles. But he was too trivial, too much on the surface, to be a real friend. She tried to cool, to shake off her fit of rage. Randy was just

another of the things that didn't matter. He was a fool, but she had always known he was a fool. Only, had she suspected the height of his folly she would long ago have made him unwelcome and prevented his coming so often to the farm.

"An' I'll not forgive him," she promised herself, "thinkin' he could take Wes's place, thinkin' he would have my boy to con-trol—an' dis-*cip*-line!" the words were difficult, but she knew what they meant. "If he'd ever laid a finger on my baby I'd've killed him, I'd've killed him dead." She walked about restlessly, looked at the sleeping child, went out into the kitchen and found Berta sleeping also, her head on the table.

At last she picked up young Wes' with his shawl and pillow and carried him out to the yard. She must do something. At this time of year there were no weeds to pull, no garden to hoe, but she could sweep and rake the dry leaves about the house and make a bonfire of them. It needed doing.

She settled the child on the ground near a tree and Nicky sat watchfully beside him. Mareea raked and swept, finding in the rhythm of the motion a soothing, a release of bitterness. She looked out over her land, thrifty, clean, well-tilled, ready for the winter solstice. The air was gold with autumn sunshine, blue with autumn haze, soft and still.

Presently young Wes' awoke and began to follow her at his latest gait, not so much a step as a funny gliding motion with much arm-balancing, which made him look as if he were swimming in some pool of his own

fancy. Mareea dropped her brush-broom and knelt beside him, looking into his blue eyes, pushing back his hair, hugging him close and kissing him. "You ol' lamb," she murmured, "you ol' baby lamb, you lump o' sweetness!"

She was holding him so and talking to him when she saw Allie Dean driving into the lane. Mareea stood up. "How's Unc' Nate?" she called.

Allie Dean peered about anxiously. "Where's Randy?" she asked in return.

"Oh—he's gone this long time." Mareea's voice was careless, but she could not keep her disgust out of her face.

Allie Dean hurried out of the buggy, let the horse stand. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Did something happen?" She could not hold her impatience. Oh, it wasn't possible, it couldn't be that Mareea had refused him, a handsome, taking young fellow like Randy! It mustn't be!

Mareea was reluctant to tell, but she saw she must give some reason. "He made me awful mad, Randy did. I told him he could get out and not come back no more."

"But what'd he do?—What'd he *do?*" She came close to Mareea, shook with anxiety.

"He got too fresh. He said I was no good at this farm. He said"—her voice deepened to new anger— "he said he'd marry me and run ev'ything, he said my baby need a father, he said he'd dis-*cip*-line him—him, Randy! He'd do things to my baby——"

Allie Dean was too close-set on her own intent to

follow Mareea's. Misunderstanding, eager, she plunged. "Oh, Mareea—if you're hesitating on account of the boy, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take him, I'll take care of him like I did my own Wes'. I wouldn't want to see Randy Covey stepfathering it over that child any more than you would, but if that's what's stopping you you needn't hesitate another minute. I'll take the boy right off your hands. I wouldn't want you to lose a fine young man like Randy on that account, and of course I don't expect you to stay unmarried account of Wes'. You're too young, you're too pretty——"

Mareea's silence encouraged her. She went on, the words tumbling out, all the lying, flattering words with which she meant to convince Mareea, to urge and push her on. "Your hesitation does you real credit, but you ought to do the sensible thing while you got the chance. You can't keep on running this farm like you been doing, it's unreasonable to expect it, and Randy's just the man for you. He'd be such a help and a comfort. Only—about the boy—he'd be none too pleased to have another man's child around the house, and that's why it's so lucky for you that I'm right here, ready and able to help you out and make it easy for you."

It was clear to Mareea now, clear to the least detail. They were trying to take from her the two things that made her life: her child and the land. She saw the relentless, devouring greed in Allie Dean's face, and heard it echoing in her voice. She, Mareea, was not considered save as she had something that Allie Dean and Randall Covey coveted, the woman her child, the man her self

and her property. They would strip her to naught with grasping hands, they would make her naught. She was to be a mother no longer, she was to be chief and director of her farm no longer, she was to forget Wes'. Why, they wanted to take Wes' and all he had been to her away from her, too.

"Get back in that buggy, Missis Din," said Mareea, "an' go away from here as quick as you can. Don' stop to get no clo'es for I won' let you in the house. You can' stay here no longer. You are *wicked!*"

"Why—what d'you——"

"Get in that buggy and go back to Unc' Nate or Lucy or wherever you want, but you don' stay here. Never no more! You would take my boy—an' I mus' marry that bum Randy an' he would run the farm here as bad as he runs his own. This is what you plot and plan for all the time. You make jus' one mistake—you should have tol' me first an' I save you all this bother. Now, out you go! I drove out that Randy to-day—now you."

"You don't mean it! Oh, Maria—you wouldn't separate me from the baby!" It was a cry of despair.

"You don' mind separate me from my baby. Get in that buggy, I say, or I whip you with this broom."

She drove Allie Dean, step by step, to the buggy, made her mount into it. She seized old Doll's head and turned her round. "Now you go—an' don' come back here!" she ordered grimly. "Don' come back here *never.*"

Old Doll walked down the lane as slowly as only a

wise old horse can go in the wrong direction from a good stable, good feed. Allie Dean sat limp, the reins dropping from her hands, her stiff straight shoulders beaten and drooping and forlorn. She did not know what to do. She might go back to Unc' Nate and send the old man over to mediate between herself and this crazy woman. But no! He would torment her mercilessly if she returned to him with this story. Better to go on to Lucy and Bob. She began to cry hopelessly. She could not even pray. She knew that young Wes' was forever lost to her, no matter where she went. . . .

In the yard Mareea stood, watching the buggy go down the lane, turn into the county road. She stood square and strong, her feet firm on her own land—her land that knew her, that she knew. The sun was full in her eyes, but she did not blink. Young Wes', gliding by, made a clutch at her skirts, and she reached for him, swung him to her shoulder, held him so that his straight young body was a part, a continuance of her own youth and strength. Together they saw the buggy disappear.

She turned to the house, the child riding high in her arms. Now she was alone, alone with her fields, her child, the cherished love of her heart for her husband. She needed nothing more.

THE END

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